

BACCANO!

バッカーノ! 2001

The Children Of Bottle

成田良悟

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電撃文庫

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『不死者 エルマー・C・アルバトロスについての個人的見解』

著述: ヒューイ・ラフオレット(不死者リスト)

エルマー・C・アルバトロス。私の親友である。唯一私が「人」として接する事ができる男だ。彼を除くあらゆる森羅万象は——。例え我が娘でさえも「研究対象」に過ぎない。作戦実行の前日。私は何故か彼の事を思い出し、忘れぬ内に書き記しておく事をした。

彼の過去は深い絶望と共にあった。いや、それしかないと言つべきだらうか。エルマーという男は、あらゆる絶望を与えられる為だけに生まれ来た男だつた。エルマーはカロル的な宗教団体の「生贋」として生まれたつまつ——。彼の母は己の子が生贋となる事を喜び、自ら進んで胎内に宿したという事になる。

彼は崇高な生贋として敬意を持つて身体を傷つけられ、愛を持つて虐げられた。彼の周囲の數十、数百人の間の歪んだ希望に晒されながら、そして10年の月日が流れ——。彼は救われた。いや、更なる絶望に落ちとされたと言つべきかもしない。

欧州全土で猛威を振るっていた魔女狩の風習……多くの無垢なる魂を冤罪に陥れた力のつねりがその集団にも襲い掛かつたのだ。

少年は、昇華の刃で首を斬なられる寸前に助け出された。邪教に攪乱され殺されかけた少年。彼は「神」に救われた幸福な少年として世界に譲えられた。

それから5年後、私がエルマーに初めて会つた時も、私に初めて前述の過去を明かしてくれた時も——。彼、笑っていた。

「その時俺は思ったね、この世にはきっと神様なんでないんだろうなってさ。だから俺は俺の力で皆を変へさせたしんだよ」

エルマーの笑顔には何の混じりけも無かつたが、逆にそれが後の闇を表しているような気がしてならない。

「俺には幸福って感覚が良く解らない。今俺の表情が本当に笑顔なのかも解らない。だから俺は、人に笑顔と幸せを望むのかもしれない。そつそつればいつか自分の笑顔を信じられる気がしてさ」

幸福も笑顔も自分で知らない男が、果たしてそれを他人に与えられる物なのか?

そう尋ねると、彼はより一層楽しそうに笑う。

「そうか、だとすると俺のやつてる事は全て自己満足の上に無駄足りて事になるなあ……これは中々笑える話だとは思わないか?」

「幸せな奴だ。そう思つて、私は彼に少し嫉妬し——同時に、私は初めて人前で笑つてみせた。

語るべき事はまだまだあるが、外に捜査局の連中が来たようだ。やれやれ、ヴァンクターノの奴も存外せぬがちな——。(以下、白紙)

Personal Thoughts on the Immortal, Elmer C. Albatross

Written by: Huey Laforet (Immortal, Terrorist)

Elmer C. Albatross. My friend, and also the only person on earth who I think of as "human." Every other thing in this world - even my own daughter - is nothing more than material for my experiments. I thought of him for some reason today, this day before I put my plan into motion, and decided to put my thoughts down on paper lest I forget.

There was great despair in his past. No, maybe saying that there was nothing *but* despair would be a better expression. The man known as Elmer was born solely to be given despair. He was born as a living sacrifice to a cult. In other words, his own mother bore him in the hopes that he would become a sacrifice.

A noble sacrifice, he was abused as a sign of respect, and tortured as a sign of love. He was at the mercy of the dozens, no, hundreds, of twisted hopes that surrounded him. A decade passed, and lo, he was rescued. No, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he fell into new and deeper depths of despair.

The witch hunts that spread across the whole of Europe like wildfire - the power that had caused countless innocent souls to be wrongly accused... The influence of that power made itself known, at length, to that cult as well. The boy who was to be a living sacrifice was saved, just moments before the blade of sublimation fell upon his head. The boy who had been captured by heretics and doomed to death was then raised up as the boy who had been saved by God.

When I met him, five years after the events mentioned, he laughed as he explained his peculiar past to me.

"At that moment, I knew there was no such thing as God in this world. That's why I want to make people laugh by myself."

Though Elmer's smile was clear, I could not help but feel as though that very smile served to show the dark inside him.

"I don't know much about the emotion you call happiness. I don't even know if the expression my face is holding right now is a real smile. That might be why I want others to smile and be happy. I think maybe then, I'll be able to believe that my own smile is also genuine."

But can he, a man who knows not happiness or laughter, give that to others?

I asked him this question and he laughed, as though it had only served to amuse him further.

"I see. Then that means that everything I do is a worthless act of self-satisfaction... Don't you think that's pretty funny?"

He is a happy man. As that thought rose in my mind, a tiny bit of envy made itself known in my heart, and at the same time I laughed in front of another person for the first time in my life.

I have much to write still, but it seems the FBI's minions have arrived outside. My, my, Victor is unexpectedly impatience (the rest of the page is blank)



復讐。シルヴィの目にはそれしか

無かった。

あの船から降りた時、拙者にも

セラードに対する憎しみが無かつた

と言えば嘘になろう。だが、あの娘

の目に宿る炎たるや、弟を失つたマ

イザー殿を遥かに凌駕するもので

あた。

セラードが裏切った時は、シルヴ

イはそれこそ自ら命を絶たんとい

勢いたったが……それはエルマー殿

とマイザー殿の説得で落ち着いたよ

うた。だが、拙者は氣付いてしまった

のだ。彼女の目に悲しみの代わり

に静かな炎が満ちている事に。

「シルヴィ、あいつの為にも……そん

なに思いつめないで下さい」

「ええ……大丈夫、大丈夫ですかう」

マイザー殿の言葉に、シルヴィは全

く笑いながら頷くが、あの娘の目は全

く変わらぬままだ。

船を下りる時——拙者の視線に

気付いたのである。周りの誰にも

聞こえぬ声で、今にも涙を溢れさせ

そうな——それで、いながら修羅の

如き強き怒りに溢れた眼を見開き

ながら呟いた。

「伊九郎さん……私のこの感情って

何時かは消えんでしょうか。永遠

と言ふ長い長い時の中、ごめ怒り

はやがて薄れてしまつたでじまづか

『不死者 シルヴィリュミエールという娘』

東郷田九郎(不死者、フリーター)曰く

あれから3000年近くの年月が流れ、こうして、彼女らしき歌姫がいるという町に辿りついたのだが——足運がた。彼女はマイザー殿と思しき人物と共に町を去つたようだ。いたしかたあるまい。拙者は懐かしき者達の足跡を追つて、再び異国の地を彷彿う事にした。やれやれ、果たして今度祖国に戻るのはいつの日になる事か……。

何か言葉をかけるべき

だとは思ったのだが——拙

者が

迷う

内に

シルヴィ

は

その確

を更に

鋭い

ものとし

ながら

切

り

おつた。

「うたう、私はそんな永遠なん

ていいなさい」

まじしく外柔内剛——だが、その

性根の強さの理由に拙者は頷く事

も否む事も出来なんだ。何かを失

うと、うのは、ここまで人を愛えて

しまつものなのかな。だとするならば、

我らは冰の時の中、どれだけ変貌

していく事になるというのである

か。

The Woman Known as Sylvie Lumiere, Immortal

Tougo Denkuro (Immortal, Unemployed)

Only the thirst for revenge could be seen in Sylvie's eyes.

When this one left the boat, it would be a lie to say that there was no hate in him for Szilard. But the fire in the girl's eyes burned even hotter than that of Maiza, who had lost his younger brother.

Though Sylvie had been determined to take her own life when Szilard betrayed us, it seemed as though Master Elmer and Master Maiza's efforts managed to calm her. But this one realized that her eyes were filled, not with sadness, but with silent flame.

"Sylvie, please don't think about it too much. For his sake."

"Oh, yes. I'm fine now."

Though Sylvie smiled as she replied to Master Maiza's words, the light in her eyes changed not at all.

As we disembarked from the boat, perhaps she sensed this one's stare. In tones that were barely audible, her face looking as though any moment she might burst into tears, and yet at the same time filled with terrible hatred, she spoke.

"Mr. Denkuro... When will these emotions of mine disappear? Do you think that this feeling, this rage, will fade over the course of the long, long time called eternity?"

As this one searched for a reply, flustered, her features hardened and she spoke harshly in clipped tones.

"Then I have no need of eternity."

Verily, gentle in appearance but with a core of steel. But this one could not say for certain whether her strong resolve was right or wrong. Could losing something change a person so much? In that case, how much would we all change over the course of time beyond imagining?

Three centuries passed, and though this one found his way to the village where he had heard of a singer who matched her description... alas, too late. It seemed that she had left along with someone who this one surmised to be Master Maiza.

So be it. This one has resolved to journey these foreign lands in search of those long lost faces. Goodness, when will the day come that this one once again sets foot upon his homeland?



『不死者 ナイルに関する調書(一部抜粋)』

作成者:ヴィクター・タルボット(不死者、FBI所属)

対象である「ナイル」という人物に関する私意は省略する。対象の供述の内容を把握すれば、対象の**人間性**は概ね理解できる物と判断した為である。

俺は王だ。そう名乗りたがて俺の母なる大河の名をつけられた。俺を拾った地質学者は最後まで俺に姓を与えないかったがな。だから俺もあいつの事は親父とは呼ばん

前略

供述2

「不死を得た俺は、次第に強・恐怖に囚われるようになつた。自分が死を知らぬ存在となつた事で、やがて他人の死」という概念すらも忘れてしまうのではないかと。

そして俺は戦場に向かつた。古東西の戦場を駆け巡り、常に「死」の側に身を置こうとしたのだ。例え

「何年もの月日が流れ、俺の目の前には……死体が広がついた。山の様にな。あれを言おう。」

供述3

俺は恐ろしかつたよ。「死」を忘れない為に、人であり続ける為に戦地に身を置いていた俺が、逆に「死」に馴れてしまうとはな。だから、俺は怖いんだよ。自分で自分の頭を見るのがな」

冷戦中に私の元を訪れた対象は、疲弊した声で供述を続けた後に去つて行った。私は彼を拘束するような真似はせず、ただ笑つて見送った。

つまりこんな調書を提出したら俺の地位が危うくなるわけで、この調書は今から只の秘密日記に変更する。まったくやつてられるかつてんだ畜生畜生畜生。あの忌々しい

……(以下、FBI長官に対する愚痴の数々)

幸だと想っていた。だが、それは間違った。不死者たるが寿命のある人間だろうが何も変わらん。死別の悲しみに回数など関係ない。何時だつて同じなのだ。

だが――変わつて、いる物がつた。俺の貌だ。俺は自分の無力さに叫びをあげた。俺の心は怒りに満ち溢れているか、あるいは悲しみに打ちひしがれているかと思つていた。しかし――湖面に映つたその顔は――無表情に近い、ただの白面だった。

俺は恐ろしかつたよ。「死」を忘れない為に、人であり続ける為に戦地に身を置いていた俺が、逆に「死」に馴れてしまうとはな。だから――

俺は怖いんだよ。自分で自分の頭を見るのがな」

Report on the Immortal, Nile (excerpt)

Written by: Victor Talbot (Immortal, FBI)

(omitted)

I will refrain from writing my personal thoughts regarding the subject, one "Nile." This is due to the fact that, upon examining the statements he has given, one can easily determine the nuances of his personality.

Statement 1

"I am a king. I was taken in solely for that purpose, and named after the river that was my mother. The archeologist who took me in never gave me a surname, and so I never called him Father."

Statement 2

"Upon gaining eternal life, I found myself gripped by an increasingly powerful fear. A fear that one day, having become a being which knew nothing of death, I would come to forget the concept of other peoples' passing, as well. And so I strode forth onto the battlefield. I journeyed everywhere there was war, resolving to hold death ever close to my side. Even should that death never take me."

Statement 3

"And as the years passed, before my eyes... I beheld a great mountain of corpses. I say this: it was a sight which I had seen so often it was now tiresome.

"But... upon losing those who I had called comrades on the battlefield to death, unable to protect them, I realized a truth. That immortality itself no longer pained me. What would truly send me to my knees would be the time to come when everyone but myself would some day succumb to death and I would be swallowed in complete darkness.

"It was no different. Not one bit. Though I thought that losing those dear to me one by one would be the tragedy of immortality, I learned that that thought was little more than folly. Immortal or mortal, there was no difference whatsoever. The number of losses meant nothing. It was always the same.

"Yet... there was one thing that had changed. My face. I cried out at my own helplessness. I

thought that my mind would explode from rage, or be crushed by sadness. But the face that stared back at me from the lake's mirrored surface was... nearly expressionless, with only a hint of sourness about it.

"I was terrified. To think that throwing myself into war in order to remember death, to continue to exist as a human... would instead result in becoming inured to death itself. And that is why I am afraid. Afraid to look upon my own face with my own eyes."

The subject, who came to me during the Cold War, gave his account in an exhausted voice and vanished. Instead of arresting him, I laughed calmly and sent him on his way.

...In the end, submitting this report would end up jeopardizing my position, so as of this moment I will make this report my secret diary. I'm just not cut out for this stuff. Shit, shit, shit. Those god damn... (what follows is endless griping about FBI executives)

「なあミリア。俺達さ……年を取つてないような気がするんだが、気のせいだろ？」

「……」

「……」

「わあ、本当だよ！」

「……むう。何故こうなつたのかは解らないが、このままじゃ俺達は大事な人の死に全く立ち会う事になつてしまつ。ほらアレ、七とかで良くあるだろ？ 永遠に生きる人は実は一番不幸だとかそういう事の

「そんなんの嫌だよ……」

「大丈夫さ！ なあミリア」考案して

も見ろよ。大事な人が死んでしまう事は、普通に生きてた二回もある事だろ？」

「うん……そうだね」

「それに、ただ不幸だ不幸だつて喚いてても、死んだ人に悪いだろ？」

だって、人が死んで悲しいって事は、生きている間にその何倍も楽しい時間をくれたつて事だしな！」

「……」

「東洋では人間が生まれ変わる為に、正月に二〇八回鈴を鳴らすそうだ。『ボーンノウ』って言うらしい！ ボーンでノウ……つまり生まれて来る事を知るって事さ！ だから、

『不死者 アイザック&ミリアの掛け合い』

2001年 夏



「ああ、きやなー！ 『アーヴィング』、誕生日おめでとう！」

「リフレッシュだね！ 毎日が誕生日だね！」「じゃあ毎日お祝いしないでどう？」

「わあ、きやなー！ 『アーヴィング』、誕生日おめでとう！」

「死んでいくのを見るたゞじゃなくて、これから生まれて来る人達と楽しもうつゝ事さ！」

「……そつか！ それなら悲しさと楽しさが相殺して、いつもどおりだね」

「うそ、つまり俺達は今まで以上に、これからのお出会いを大事にしようつてこつた！」

「わあい、アイザックの言う通りだね！」

「この決意を身体で表す為に下腹に二〇八個の鈴をつけようぜ！」

「一人五十四個だね！」

「常に新しく生まれ変わり続けるつて事か！」

The Deal Made by the Immortals, Isaac and Miria

Summer 2001

"Say, Miria. Is it just me, or... are we not aging at all?"

"..."

"..."

"Wow, you're right!"

"...Mmm. I don't know how this came about, but at this rate we'll end up having to attend the funerals of all our friends. You know, like on television. Those who live forever are always the most unfortunate."

"I don't want that..."

"It's okay! Think about it. Loved ones die all the time even if you live a normal life, right?"

"Yes... you're right."

"And not only that, but grieving over our misfortune would be a disservice to the dead. After all, the fact that we're sad for the dead just means that they gave us many times more happiness while they were alive!"

"..."

"In the East, they say that you have to ring a bell 108 times for a person to be born again. They call this 'bonnou' - that's short for 'born know'¹. In other words, they *know* that they'll be reborn! So instead of just watching people die, let's enjoy life with the new people who're coming into the world!"

"...So that's it! In that case, our sadness and happiness will cancel each other out!"

"Right in one! That's why we have to enjoy every new meeting even more!"

"Wow, Isaac, you're right!"

¹ A misunderstanding mistakenly referencing the Shinto custom of ringing a large bell 108 times on New Year's Eve, once for every impure thought blocking the way to Nirvana. In Japanese, these earthly desires are referred to as *百八煩惱* - *hyakuhachi bonnou*. The mention of rebirth is also a reference to the Buddhist belief in reincarnation; as long as a soul cannot rid itself of all 108 earthly temptations, it will be constantly reborn onto the mortal world instead of passing on to Nirvana.

"Let's string 108 bells onto our clothes to show our determination!"

"54 for each of us!"

"That means people will be born again all the time!"

"We're refreshing them! It's like every day is a birthday!"

"Then every day is a party!"

"Yay! Happy Birthday, Isaac!"



Preface

February 2003

Somewhere

Hey.

You look cheerful.

Your clothes are certainly strange, though. Is it because Valentine's Day is just around the corner? All those round things on your clothes... you'll end up neurotic.

I see. So that's the method to your madness. Pretty enthusiastic, aren't you.

Looking at you makes me remember him.

...Happy End was his nickname. You can call him Mr. Happy End, or *The Happy End*, or whatever you think sounds cool. He'd be satisfied as long as Happy End fit in there somewhere.

Right, he's a strange one. He can't see anything but the happiness of others, you see. No matter whether the person who wants happiness is good or evil.

What kind of person is he? If you're asking whether he's happy... I don't think he knows, himself. But if you were to give him a definition of either good or bad, he's absolutely evil. No doubt about it.

That doesn't make sense, you say? You have no idea. You can't just decide out of hand that everyone who wants happiness is good, can you?

...You want to hear more? The rambling of a wanderer like me?

Haha, my thanks.

Well, I still have a bit of time until my companions get here, so if it's okay with you I'll kill some time by telling you the tale.

This is... that's right. It all began 300 years ago, aboard a certain boat...

Prologue
Smile Junkie

1711, The Atlantic Ocean
The Advena Avis

"Damn it! Get up! Wake up, everyone! We're all going to die! We're all going toaaaaaarrrrgh..."

Chaos reigned aboard the ship.

In the darkness, all they could hear were screams.

These alchemists had left their homes for the new world.

They had succeeded in summoning a demon.

And in doing so, they achieved one of the ultimate goals of alchemy - eternal youth.

But that immortality came with a troublesome restriction.

There was one way for them to die. Another immortal would put their right hand on their head. And then, all they had to do was concentrate and think, "I want to eat." Once that happened, all the victim's knowledge, memories, experience - sometimes even their personality - would be devoured. They would die, and the one who remained would inherit all that they were.

But naturally, there was one who thought of it from an opposite direction. This restriction actually allowed him to imagine a different conclusion.

Eat everyone and become king of the immortals, inheriting everyone's experiences.

The second night after the demon came and went, there was a man who chose a road that would ultimately lead to eternal loneliness. The name of that man, the one who turned on his fellow alchemists and transformed the ship into a living hell, was....

"It's Szilard! That crazy old man's betrayed us all!"

"Damn it... Stop him! Someone stop him! It doesn't matter who does it, just *eat him!*"

"Watch out! He's already eaten about five people! He doesn't move like an old man anymore!"

As shouts rang out on board, there was one who tried to hide in the ship's hold.

She was sixteen, perhaps seventeen. Even at a glance, one could tell that she was out of place in this situation: a girl with silver hair, wearing glasses.

...I'm scared. I'm so scared. I have to hide somewhere.

...He's... he's hiding somewhere, too. I know it.

I have to find him...

Confused by the commotion caused in the middle of the night, she ran as though fleeing, away from the direction where the shouts were coming from. Though she had been planning to hide in the hold until the chaos died down...

Reflected in her wide, frightened eyes was the mocking smirk of the old man who had caused this uproar.

"To think I would come to eat a young girl here. My sexual desire has long since faded, but I'm so excited right now I have no regard for such things."

And so said, his right hand tensed atop her forehead.

But *absolutely nothing happened.*

The eyes of the old man - Szilard Quates - widened slightly. It seemed as though he was surprised, but shortly understanding dawned on his face.

"Sylvie, you wench... *you didn't drink it?*"

"Ah... ahh...."

Szilard's eyes shone with cold light. The girl Sylvie stiffened, unable to speak.

...I'm going to die.

The moment the thought rose in her mind, the old man's right hand fell from her head and onto the floor. His arm had been severed at the elbow, and blood spurted furiously from the wound.

Droplets of blood splashed onto Sylvie as well, but soon the liquid began to tremble and, like a hive of insects, flowed back into Szilard's right arm. Linked by a line of blood, the arm rose into the air and snapped onto its owner's stump as though connected by a rubber band.

"Guh... aaaaahh!!"



"It seems as though immortality doesn't grant immunity to pain. It's fortunate I was able to test it out on you."

An arrogant voice rang out in the hold as Szilard struggled to overcome the pain. It was a young man with dusky skin. In this right hand was a blade that looked like a Chinese meat cleaver, and silent rage flared on his features.

"Nile... you wretch...!"

"My anger right now can't be expressed in words, but I will tell you what I feel anyway. I'm going to kill you."

The man called Nile raised his cleaver high into the air, toward Szilard, whose arm had completely healed.

"Though it's just a waste of breath, I say this... Die."

The thick blade cut the air as though to cleave Szilard's head in two. The old man threw himself to the side, just barely avoiding it, and fled toward the stairs across from Nile at a dead run.

Instead of chasing after Szilard, Nile knelt and addressed the young girl shivering under him.

"Mm. Are you unharmed?"

Sylvie raised herself to her feet and opened her mouth to reply.

"Hey, I see you two are just fine."

From above Nile's head, a cheerful voice came down, completely at odds with the desperate situation.

"It looks like I don't even have to ask. You guys are fine. That's great, just great. Sylvie, Nile, both of you. Now then, *this might be a bit sudden, but smile*. Come on, give me a big smile that shows all your teeth."

The two looked up and saw a man grinning widely, the ongoing crisis aboard the ship reflected on his face not at all. He hooked his fingers into the sides of his mouth and spread them wide in a huge smile.

"Shee? Shma, shma! (See? Smile, smile!)"

"This is no time for jest, Elmer."

"Who's joking? You should smile whenever you're in a pinch. Smiling makes you calmer," the man named Elmer said, the joy in his voice wilting a shade at Nile's harsh reply. Still, the smile on his face showed no signs of disappearing... and yet, there was something strangely unsettling about it, and even Nile found it impossible to tell him to stop.

"Only a fool like you could smile in a situation like this. If you're going to hide, do it quickly."

Elmer shook his head. "Nope. I'm going to *go and convince* old man Szilard to stop, so you two just sit tight here."

Sylvie and Nile's eyes widened at Elmer's confident voice.

"I say this: it's impossible. Even if you manage to make him stop, Maiza won't stand for it. He's going to die anyway, so it'd be better for us to kill him quickly and cut our losses to a minimum."

"Then I'll just convince Maiza to be merciful."

"Rubbish."

"Right, rubbish. So I'll go and convince him first. If I fail and get eaten, then you can do what you want."

"Don't do it!" Sylvie shouted, despite herself. Elmer's casual tone, as though he was going to grab a quick snack, had forced her into speaking. "How do you think you're going to stop him? He... he smiled when he tried to eat me! Like he was enjoying it... There's no way that words will work on someone like him!"

But Elmer's reply was even more surprising.

"I see. Old man Szilard smiled, huh... *Then I guess things will work out somehow.*"

"*What...?*"

Elmer ignored the surprised expression on Sylvie's face and grinned.

"Smile, Sylvie! You've got to smile!"

And, leaving behind the sound of cheerful laughter, his face disappeared from the doorway.

The two left behind. At length, Sylvie found it in herself to hesitantly ask a question.

"Umm... Nile, what did Elmer mean by, 'Maiza won't stand for it'?"

"Err..."

A shadow passed over Nile's face.

"It can't be... It's not, right? It's not that, is it?"

Sylvie grasped Nile's dark arm and shook it fiercely, as though to wring an answer from him.

"Tell me it's not! Tell me it's not that! Please, Nile!"

Tears began to flow from Sylvie's eyes, but Nile could do nothing but keep his silence.

"Damn it, where is that old man!?"

"I found him! He's on the deck!"

"Hey! Old man Szilard! Over here! Look here and listen to me!"

"Who is that? Is that Elmer?"

"That, fool, what, is he, doing, there."²

"Be careful!"

"Elmer!!"

The sound of water, and silence.

Elmer's consciousness was consumed by endlessly spreading darkness.

And... through it, he heard a voice.

[Are you alright.]

² This is Veg, an immortal who is introduced in a subplot of the fourth novel, Drugs & Dominoes, as a drug maker employed by the Runorata family. The Drugs part of the title, if you will

His storyline mostly has to do with another novel-only character, Roy Murdoch, and so the anime version of this novel's storyline (which has to do with Eve looking for her brother and the Runorata Family's war with the Gандor Family) rubbed him out. The parts that Roy played were mostly handled by various other characters, while the conflict with the Runorata Family as a whole was mostly downplayed in favor of the Eve looking for Dallas plotline.

The voice brought Elmer to his wits.

It was a strange feeling, as though he was floating in the air. He could see the face of a man through his slitted eyelids, a face that seemed somehow familiar. And beyond that, only darkness.

[What a foolish one you are. To think you would do a somersault on the prow to grab the old man's attention. Well, no matter. You fell into the sea so you weren't eaten.]

...Ah, that phrase. *Well, never mind.* That's right. I remember that. This man is the demon.

The demon who had given them immortality. As Elmer pondered why he was still here instead of gone back to wherever he came from, the demon calmly spoke again.

[I had planned to go back, but something caught my eye, you see. Well, no matter. Anyway, it looked like you were trying to convince that old man to stop, but... do you really think that was possible?] the demon asked quietly, staring at Elmer as though he was some sort of strange life form. Elmer gave it some thought and replied, grinning from ear to ear.

"I think it's possible. Sylvie said that Szilard smiled, you see."

[Smiled?]

"...The fact that he smiled means that he was still human, after all. Even though that might be the smirk of a murderer moments after a kill, I don't deny the fact of a smile. As long as you can smile somehow, you can still talk things over. Things might be different if this was a war, but this is just something about an individual's feelings and desires, isn't it? No matter how slim the chance might be, I want to give it a chance."

[Hmm. But seeing how you turned out, I think your goal might have been a nearly impossible task.]

"That's fine. I didn't think that the happiest ending in that situation would involve Szilard being eaten instantly, see. But letting him go would be even worse. I'm going to convince him to apologize from the bottom of his heart, and make him atone for what he did for all of eternity... until the others forgive him."

[Are you ignoring the ones who've already been eaten?]

"The dead can't smile. They can't be sad, or angry, either. That's what it means to be dead. If ghosts really do exist in this world... I don't think you can call those people dead. Well, I mean, respect for the dead might be an important thing, but... I don't really care."

The demon was silent for a moment, and then its voice rang directly inside his head.

[Hmm. I thought you were just a good-natured simpleton, but it seems you've got more evil than good in you. Well, no matter. You're an interesting one. Very well, I guess you could call this a connection between us.]

The demon said something unbelievably *exciting*.

[I'll give you any power you want, just say it. If you wish, I can take away all the conditions from your immortality. I can give you the power of farsight, to look at distant places, or the power to stop time, or mind control. Anything.]

"Like Aladdin's magic lamp."

[Something like that. Except it's just one wish instead of three.] the demon said mockingly, shaking his head.

Elmer gave it a moment of thought and grinned.

"I've made my decision, demon."

[That was fast,] said the voice inside his head, surprised.

Unhesitatingly, Elmer gave voice to the power he wanted.

"Look, demon. What I want is...."

"Hey! Are you okay, Elmer?!"

"He's woken up!"

"What a relief."

The sound of a hand slapping a cheek. Elmer sensed light flooding his field of vision.

He looked around and saw he was back on the deck, the soft light of the morning sun shining warmly over him. He gave it a moment of thought and concluded that someone had fished him back up after he fell into the sea.

"...What happened to old man Szilard?"

"Mmm, Huey and Denkuro had him cornered, but he jumped into the sea and we lost him."

"I see..." Elmer said shortly.

He stopped trying to get up, instead laying flat on the deck and looking up at the sky, his mind awhirl with thoughts. The morning sunlight shone in his eyes, but he could still make out stars in the faint dawn sky.

He glanced away and saw his comrades heaving sighs of relief as they looked down at him.

Their smiles helped him on his way back to sleep.

But... just before he lost consciousness, he realized that someone on the ship was wailing in sorrow, and he smiled a sad smile.

"No, Sylvie. You have to smile. Smile..."

Muttering as though talking in his sleep, the thin thread of his consciousness snapped and he sank into deep darkness.

And... time passed.

December 1998

A village in northern Europe

A forest.

The stately, grand array of trees hid the village from sight under a veil of snow.

It was a place rife with conifer trees, almost too many, side by side as though to rebel against the laws of nature. And amongst those trees, a lone shadow trudged through the woods.

The man, his silhouette made large and cumbersome by his thick winter clothes, looked to be wandering aimlessly through the snowy cascade of trees.

"This is a bit of a pinch."

The shadow stopped in front of a huge hardwood and muttered to himself. The steam caused by his sigh clouded immediately into white mist that blocked his vision. He glanced up to the sky as his breath dispersed into the air.

He could barely make out the sky through the thick barrier of conifer trees. The dark navy color told him that the sun would set soon.

"So it was fake information, huh. Well, I guess if you think about it there's no way a castle'd be in a place like this."

Fixing his gaze back on the ground, the man looked about.

A line of pure white snow could barely be glimpsed through the strangely thick barrier of trees.

"Now, what to do. Should I turn back, or..."

He looked around, mumbling to himself. The area in front of him had less white than the path from which he'd come. The forest was strange enough as it was, but the woods blocked out sunlight in a peculiar way, making it seem as though there was only darkness lying before him.

The man gave it a second of thought, then began trudging forward deeper into the forest.

As though he was being led by something...

Someone is in the forest.

A man.

He wears thick clothes, and only part of his face is laid bare to the cold air.

He notices me standing at the entrance to the village and says something.

"Hello."

What a strange expression. The corners of his mouth are raised and his eyes are only half open. It was an expression I have not seen often on the faces of the townspeople.

The expression that the "outside people" sometimes show. I still do not know what this expression means.

No. I should know, but the knowledge has merely vanished from my memory. Because I have not had the chance to see it for so long.

"Wow, but it's really cold, isn't it! Freezing! Come on, let's thank this incredible chill! If it weren't for this cold, these winter clothes of mine would've been useless!"

A strong, clear voice.

"Anyway, is there an inn in this village? If there is, can you show me the way? I slept a night in the forest and I've been walking all day, so I'll take any place I can get."

An inn. A facility to temporarily house outsiders.

Such a thing does not exist in this village. With that knowledge in mind, I shake my head.

"What, no? That complicates things. Is there any place I can rest a while? Anywhere I can find shelter from the rain and the wind will do. Mmm, even someplace like a watermill would be just fine. I wonder what kind of place this village is. I didn't think there'd be people living in the middle of a forest like this. Maybe there's a road to the city on the other side? But on the map it said that there was nothing but forest for dozens of kilometers in every direction. I must say, you can't trust anything you haven't made sure of yourself! Don't you think? Oh, that's right. My name's Elmer. Elmer C. Albatross. El for short. Nice to meet you!"

Words. Words pour forth from this man in a flood. More words than I can comprehend, and so I cannot form a reply. In just one breath, this man releases more words than the villagers do in a month.

Elmer.

I manage to grab hold of that one proper noun amidst the barrage that assails me.

"Ah, I'm sorry! It's been so long since I've met anybody, so I just babbled on and on about myself and didn't even let a cute girl like you get in a word edgewise! Uhh, you can understand what I'm saying, right? I think I'm talking in the language of this country. Wait, maybe I'm not? Well then, starting again from the top, is there any place I can get some rest?"

I understand. I just cannot follow.

"I will... lead you. Master... Elmer."

A normal reaction. I reply as I would to any of the townspeople. But Master Elmer cocks his head to one side.

"Huh? Why're you talking like that? Ah, maybe that's it. Do you work as a waitress at a restaurant or something?"

Without even waiting for a reply, Master Elmer lets loose with another flood of words.

"The townspeople here are pretty queer, aren't they? They ran inside and locked themselves up the moment I came! Maybe they hate outsiders? Or maybe they're getting ready for Christmas!"

Christmas. Another unfamiliar word.

At a loss for words, I merely stare silently at Master Elmer's face.

"...What what what? Did I say something wrong? Here, I'll apologize."

"What is... Christmas?"

I give a reply.

That is my duty.

"...Huh? You don't know? Christmas. Aha, I'd thought that everyone around here would know since it's even spread to the East these days, but maybe the religion around here's different? Perhaps I'll look into it later."

The last part he mumbles to himself. Then, looking at my face, he suddenly smiles.

"That's right! This'll do it! If it's not against the laws of the religion around these parts, I'll teach you about Christmas! Let's see, Christmas is... well, in short, it's a celebration! Everyone laughs and smiles and eats cake and turkey and gives presents to each other!"

Master Elmer's face fills with even more frantic energy. His voice ring loudly. His hands advance toward me.

Master Elmer's hands stroke my cheeks.

"That's right, smile. Everyone smiles when there's a festival. Smile, yeah! Smile! This might be a bit sudden, but cute kids like you are cutest when you're smiling. Mmm, that is, this is probably a little trite, but I'll give you a smiling face as a Christmas present! I'm telling you, you'll be cute. You'll be charming! You'll be really adorable! All the boys'll only have eyes for you!"

And so said, Master Elmer pinches my cheeks lightly. Instead of resisting, I remember one fact.

The expression on Master Elmer's face is called a "smile."

And that is the expression one makes when they are happy.

"I'll open a celebration the day after tomorrow, so sit tight and wait for it! Come on, this is the part where you smile."

Little by little, they come back. The emotion known as happiness and the memories related to it.

I want to remember more. More, more.

I feel that if I talk with this person I will remember even more. That I will learn things I do not know yet. At the celebration called Christmas, two days from now... More, more.

Another memory flashes into my mind.

Perhaps this is the emotion known as "joy." Or perhaps "hope" would be a better word...

That happened two days ago.

A hard stone floor.

The sounds echoes through the air.

Squish. Crunch. Bam.

The sounds repeat endlessly.

The thing that was Master Elmer rolls bonelessly before my eyes.

Just a simple thing. A human shaped piece of meat, leaking crimson liquid, encased in cloth.

The villagers surround it. All of them, holding stones and wooden clubs, taking turns bringing their weapons down on Master Elmer's body.

A shadow stands before me.

A middle aged man. Hairy. Leader. The mayor of this village... Master Dez.

"What have you been scheming with this outsider, you wench?"

Master Dez swings his club at me.

Pain.

My entire body is paralyzed. My body writhes on the ground of its own accord.

"Damn it, filthy girl... you actually led him to this place, this cursed monster's home!"

I can see Master Dez's foot. Underneath his hefty shoe is a pretty paper decoration. No. Not pretty any longer. It had been pretty, once.

Pretty. I wonder at the fact that this word has made itself known in my head.

When had I remembered the word "pretty?"

The club comes down once more upon my head and my body becomes unable to move.

—

"Throw her out! Throw her out, you hear me?" Master Dez shouts anxiously *as I watch*.

I lift myself onto my back and stoop, surreptitiously picking up the ornament.

The decoration is in the shape of a man in red clothes.

The flattened ornament, and Master Elmer's huddled body.

Looking at the two, a certain emotion makes itself known to me.

But I cannot remember.

What is this emotion? What should I do when this feeling boils up inside me?

I cannot think of anything. And that was why I cannot do anything.

If he had but taught me. More, more, more, more, more....

How many years has it been since I wished for something so strongly?

Even knowing that that wish would not come to be...

With myself on my back, I look at on at the spectacle before me.

The people in the room begin to mutter amongst themselves.

In the time it took me to breathe twice, the villagers fall silent.

A mo

Red.

Red splashes.

The crimson-smeared hoe retreats, and the red

In the candlelight, the scarlet seems very warm.

will come grinding to a halt...



Red. Red. Red.

That color is clearly remembered inside my mind.

The uneasiness inside me becomes even worse, and I almost become sick, but even that feeling is soon drowned by the endless red.

...Red.



CHAPTER I

KIDOAIRAKU: HAPPINESS

Maiza Avaro

The four main chapters are based on the four kanji of the saying 喜怒哀樂 (kidoairaku). Read one by one the characters mean joy, anger, sorrow and happiness, and together they come to mean the scope of human emotion.

December 2001

A forest somewhere in northern Europe

"Hey, are you sure we're going the right way?" the small boy asked.

He was seated in the front seat of a car as it drove through the forest, plowing through the freshly fallen snow covering the gravel-covered trail. The snow had stopped some time ago, the sun shining down through the conifers. Strangely, the sunlight diminished as they advanced, the trees crowding ever thicker around them.

"Doesn't it seem like we're heading deeper into the forest instead of toward a town? And there's no traces on the road that a car's been this way at all."

"I'm quite sure we're going in the right direction, though it does seem that if we continue this way, the road will end soon," the bespectacled man in the driver's seat replied. His glasses had black rims, and he continued driving with a warm smile on his features.

"...Well, if you put it that way, I guess it'll be fine. But this forest... it's giving me a bad feeling."

"Haha, you still worry too much."

"What're you talking about? You're the one who's way too laid back."

The boy - Czeslaw Meyer - shot a sour glare at the man in the driver's seat - Maiza Avaro. But Maiza only gave him a quick glance and smiled even wider.

"With age comes composure," he said, though at a glance he looked to be barely into his thirties. The boy grimaced.

"I'll be 300 soon, you know. We're not that far apart in age or experience, anymore."

They were, in a word, immortals.

Not vampires, not monsters, but merely people given completely immortal bodies - eternal life, eternal youth without end save the possibility of another immortal's attack.

That was the curse and the blessing that fell upon those so gifted. The only way to kill an immortal was to be eaten by another immortal. All that needed to be done was to put one's right hand on another's head and wish...

I want to consume everything this person is.

With just that strong will, one could take in everything that made up another person. Memories, knowledge, and even muscle reflexes.

Like they were playing a game, the alchemists killed one another. Like puppets dancing on the strings of the demon who had given them immortality. Of course, most of the hideous crimes committed then could be lain squarely at the feet of one old man.

Two hundred years later, the band of alchemists who had once numbered over thirty strong could be counted on one's fingers. However, with the death of the one who had started this war, the man who had been the center of this disaster, Szilard Quates, the terror that had once gripped them faded slowly.

Maiza and Czes wandered the world, spreading the knowledge of Szilard's death to those of their comrades, those who had gone to earth in order to hide from Szilard's hunger.

And thanks to a clue regarding the whereabouts of one of those comrades, Elmer C. Albatross, they found themselves driving a car through a forest in a foreign land...

The conversation died abruptly as the car continued along the gravel trail. Silence reigned for a time, until the woman riding in the back spoke up.

"So, what kind of village are we going to? Do you think they'll have a shower, at least?" she asked, her voice clear like the ringing of a bell. She clasped both hands behind her back and stretched.

Just a brief glimpse of her slender, smooth wrist from the sleeve of her winter clothes served as a direct sign of her beauty. Her face was balanced and lovely, bringing to mind the languid grace of a great hunting cat, framed by silky hair that fell naturally about it. The short silver strands were not gathered in any particular style, but instead of dulling her beauty, the disorder served only to further accentuate the lines of her neck.

She was a woman who would definitely fit the definitions of the word "beautiful." But that beauty was not the natural loveliness of a goddess in a painting. Instead, her form was full of mysterious allure, as though she had been made in accordance to the desires of mankind.

"Mmm..."

The woman, Sylvie Lumiere, finished stretching and settled back, heaving a sigh. That motion in itself presented a fascinating temptation to any who might be watching, regardless of gender, but Maiza, perhaps used to it, saw her in the rear-view mirror and showed not the slightest sign of perturbation.

"We'll have to get there to know."

"Hmm... Is Elmer really there?"

"Most likely. The information broker in my neighborhood doesn't deal in lies."

Sylvie nodded, satisfied with his confident reply.

Czes shifted uneasily in his seat and said, "Hey, Maiza, it's getting darker even though it's still the middle of the day."

Czes bowed his head in worry, and Sylvie leaned forward and draped her arms around his neck.

"Oh, Czes. You're so cute."

"Ack! Stop that, Sylvie! I'm not a kid anymore!"

"Come now! You look like a kid, so you're cute!"

Sylvie rubbed her cheek against Czes's as he flailed in his seat. He flushed bright red, but made a great show of ignoring her and turning to Maiza.

"But this place is really creepy, I'm serious... It feels like a monster'll pop out from the trees or something."

Sylvie giggled and stroked Czes's head.

"A monster? Now you're really acting like a kid."

Czes shook off her smooth hand and muttered to himself, as though he'd remembered something he'd rather have not.

"You can only say that because you've never actually seen a monster, Sylvie."

Sylvie opened her mouth to ask what he was talking about, but before she could speak, Maiza cut her off, his expression suddenly tense.

"You're right. This is strange."

"Huh? What's wrong?"

"The forest around us. The density of the conifer spread around us is much too thick. You can tell at a glance that that these trees have grown here even though there isn't enough sunlight to support them."

Sylvie sat up straight and looked around at the woods. The trees were so close together they looked almost like they were hugging, stacked up next to each other in a formation that refused human entry.

"...Now that you mention it, it is a bit creepy. I wonder what's going on."

"I can't say for certain... Perhaps if we advance a little further, we'll be able to find something."

"I guess you could say that this place really fits Elmer," Sylvie said with a shrug, accepting Maiza's words and settling back once more, getting comfortable. "If the evilest alchemist on that boat was Szilard, and the scariest was Huey, then the strangest one had to be Elmer. He always found ways to surprise me... Though at the same time I think he was the happiest."

"Was Huey so frightening to you? Admittedly, I found myself unable to guess what he was thinking at times, but..."

"Of course he was. Remember, Elmer was the only one who was really close to Huey."

"Indeed, Elmer is quite fearless... Though he was often given to baseless boasts, like that one occasion where he claimed to have scammed Louis XIV, or that he was immune to the effects of a cursed diamond... perhaps, if it were Elmer, such things could be possible."

Suddenly, Maiza stopped the car and peered through the front window.

Blocking the way was a mound of earth, too high to be called a hill. The curve itself wasn't too steep, but dirt and rocks were thrown haphazardly together, making a great lump that would be treacherous even to traverse on foot, much less by car. Trees surrounded the slope in a close huddle, making it impossible to drive around.

"I heard that there was a tunnel passing through this place before, but... it seems that it collapsed and was buried by earth. It looks like it's been quite a while since it caved in, but thankfully no trees have taken root here."

"What do you mean, thankfully? Either way, we still can't drive over this thing. I don't know why they haven't rebuilt the tunnel," Sylvie said.

Maiza shrugged.

"It was a tunnel that nobody used in the first place. This is the entrance to the private property that's up ahead, so perhaps the owner of that area decided not to use this path any longer."

"Hmm..." Czes nodded in understanding, then stopped. "Wait, Maiza. What? Private property? I thought you said that Elmer was in a village."

"Right. From what I gather, there's *a town inside the private property* beyond here," Maiza said calmly. Czes met Sylvie's gaze in the rear-view mirror, one eyebrow quirked up.

"Hahaha. I attempted to contact the property's owner with the excuse of conducting an examination on the wildlife, but all for naught. It seems he's a man of some wealth, but I have no connections to speak of in this country."

Though he was a camorrista in an American crime organization, it seemed that such a position was of little help in a country where he didn't know anyone. Sylvie frowned and muttered to herself.

"A village... inside private property?"

"Right."

"Are you sure this information broker of yours is trustworthy?"

"Of course."

Sylvie stared at Maiza as though he'd grown a second head.

"Now then. Shall we go? Hold tight."

Go where? The question was on the tip of their tongues when Maiza slammed his foot down onto the accelerator.

"Ah! Mai-

Czes's startled cry was swallowed by a shock so tremendous that it shook the car's entire chassis. His light body jolted violently in all directions, the impact running through his spine and straight into his lungs.

"AaaAAaaaaaaaaah!

Sylvie lay flat in the back seat, absorbing the shock as the pitch of Czes's squawks rose and fell along with the car. For long minutes the car continued to rumble forward, and finally came to a stop with a huge crash - the other side of the hill ended in a steep incline that left them almost three meters above the ground.

"Aargh!"

At that moment a startled shout came from behind the back seat - the area between the seat padding and the rear panel - but none of the three people in the car took notice, instead catching their breath.

"...From time to time, you really do some wild things, you know that?"

"It comes with the job."

"Sometimes I envy that eternal composure of yours."

"My apologies."

Czes and Sylvie glared at Maiza, but he just chuckled and looked outside the car. The snowy gravel path extended forward again, though it seemed as though the carpet of snow on the ground was slightly thinner, perhaps due to the trees that stood clustered even tighter than before.

"Now, if we just go for another five kilometers or so, we should be there..."

"Maiza! You fool, are you trying to kill me?!"

Another shout came from behind Sylvie, but Maiza stepped on the accelerator as though he'd heard nothing. After making sure there was nothing wrong with the engine, he stepped on the clutch and shifted the car into first gear.

"Are you listening to me, you bastard?!"

"Of course I am, Nile," Maiza said calmly, and in one swift motion pressed the accelerator all the way to the floor. "The road is still quite rough, so be careful not to bite your tongue by accident."

The snow flew in all directions, the tires spinning furiously.

"Don't try and change the subject. I say this: things like this are the reason that your girlfriend dum-ack!"

A dull thud came from the trunk. For just a moment Maiza looked back with worry on his face, but shortly he turned back and concentrated on driving again.

The man behind the rear seat spoke no more.

In short, it was unquestionably an unsettling situation, but none of those riding in the car seemed to pay it much mind, and the vehicle trundled diligently deeper into the shadowed forest.

To a village that could be found on no map, to find an old friend...

People have come to the village.

They have come in a strange thing.

A colossal metal box. Like a carriage, but slightly smaller.

The large cart the peddler rides. It looks like that.

Just like the peddler's vehicle, it moves without the help of horses.

But it is somewhat different. It does not look to be carrying goods.

The metal box stops at the entrance to the village.

I am the first one to notice.

But the villagers are the first to approach. Holding weapons. One by one, they walk toward the metal cart.

Someone else will fall upon misfortune.

Someone else, will be unhappy.

I can feel it. Just like it was then...

...Five years ago, when Master Elmer was *killed for the first time*...

I can only watch. Even now, I can only stand and watch the townspeople as they advance, their forms full of dread and hostility.

And I can only relate back the truth I behold.

That is my mission.

"Ah, there it is."

At length, Maiza and his companions emerged from the forest and fell into a slightly wider road than the gravel path they'd left behind. Their field of vision widened dramatically, a sparkling white world unfolding before them. At first they thought it was just a normal plain, but from

the way the road was laid down in a straight line, it seemed that the snowfields around them were probably fields of farmland.

"Barley fields, perhaps," Maiza said, prompting the other two to look around. The fields, quite wide from the looks of it, were surrounded by the forest. Less snow had fallen than they'd thought, and here and there they could see bare soil through the carpet of white.

And at the end of the road, ahead of them, were a few buildings.

"So there really was a village."

"Are you sure this is private property?"

Maiza paid no heed to Sylvie and Czes's words, and parked the car at what he supposed was the village entrance.

The buildings were made of stone. From afar, they had looked like barns made for farm work, but once the car approached it became clear that they were in fact houses. They looked quite different from the rest of the housing facilities they'd seen in the country, more like sheds than proper houses.

The buildings themselves were old, granted, but the atmosphere of the village itself was so quaint and antiquated that they almost felt as though they'd stepped into a movie. No modern-looking architecture could be seen at all, further enhancing the old movie feeling.

But none of the travelers were truly confused, for the sight before them was different from the real "past" that they had actually experienced. It was as though the village hadn't come to be naturally, but had instead been constructed according to someone's calculations...

"Quite a bit bigger than I'd expected."

From the looks of it, they road where they were parked was the main path; several houses stood on each side. There were wooden buildings and log cabins as well as the stone houses they'd seen before, haphazardly mixed amongst each other.

"Looks like a pretty hastily constructed village, doesn't it. A little out of style, though," Czes mumbled.

"I don't know, I think it's got some old style charm," Maiza replied.

Sylvie closed her eyes and let out an exaggerated sigh, her shoulders slumping. "Damn. I don't think this place has a shower... or running water, for that matter."

"I'm not sure that's what we should be worrying about, Sylvie," Maiza said suddenly, his voice oddly tense.

"Why?"

Something in his tone made Sylvie look out the window once more.

A girl in shabby clothes stood in the center of the wide road that divided the town, timidly staring at the car.

"What about her?"

"Not her. The others," Czes said. His voice, too, was slightly strained.

Perhaps sensing something from the girl's expression, Sylvie looked around carefully. She'd thought at first that only the girl was there, but soon she realized that many eyes were watching them from the shadows in the streets.

From the shadows, behind windows, dozens of silhouettes stood silently, staring wordlessly at them.

"Mmm, it seems that's the case."

"What's the case?" Czes blurted, unable to contain his nervousness. Maiza adjusted his grip on the steering wheel.

"Well, there are quite a few cases of villages being found inside private property. For example, illegal organizations and extremist religious groups often set up bases much like this."

"And that means?"

"There's no telling what they'll do to outsiders. If we're lucky, they'll hand us over to the authorities for trespassing, but in the worst case..."

Maiza paused, his sharp eyes narrowing, and continued.

"The results will be unspeakably terrible."

"Let's leave. I don't want to get involved in something that could turn out to be bothersome."

"Wait, Czes. If Elmer's here, we'll have to ask these people, whether we like it or not. If Elmer has become a member of this town, then surely they'll welcome us once we explain our circumstances."

Contrary to Maiza's bright opinion, Czes remained stubbornly pessimistic.

"And if he hasn't become a member, or if he was never here in the first place?"

"Someone's coming."

"Maiza? Hey, answer me. Look at me, Maiza!"

Czes grabbed him and shook him forcefully, but Maiza ignored him and stepped out of the car alone.

"Well, in that case, I suppose we'll have no choice but to run away."

A man approached them from a ways down the road, flanked by a handful of youths. He looked to be at least middle aged, with sharp eyes and a bristly mustache. His wire-thin body was shrouded in thick winter clothes, made not of synthetic fibers but thick furs. The youths following him were dressed similarly, and in their hands they held metal clubs and hunting rifles.

The rifles were old; Maiza's memory pegged them as models that had been in use a century ago.

The girl was still standing in the middle of the road, and as the men approached Maiza they shoved her roughly out of the way. They glared ferociously at him, and their feet tramped forcefully over the stony, slushy ground.

With every building they passed, one or two of the silhouettes that had been watching from the shadows wordlessly joined them, and soon the band marching toward Maiza's group swelled to over twice its original number.

There were women among the ones who had joined the middle-aged man's group; in their hands they held kitchen knives and hoes, and their eyes were hard with hostility.

However, even as he closed the car door behind him, Maiza didn't appear to be overly concerned. His hand kept its position on the door handle, ready to open it and get in at a moment's notice.

...I only hope we can communicate with each other.

"...Who are you people? You're not the peddler... *How did you get here?*"

As though in response to Maiza's unspoken worries, the hairy man who looked to be the leader spoke. Maiza had hoped to speak first, but the motley band of villagers stopped earlier than he'd expected.

Regardless, some of the tension in Maiza's body drained away as he realized that the villagers at least spoke in the country's common dialect.

"Excuse me. We're just ordinary travelers."

There was the chance that just blurting the name of the person they were looking for would make these people suspicious. Maiza decided to first pretend to be a traveler and observe their reactions.

"Travel... you say?" the hairy man asked cautiously, shooting the car a furtive glance before glaring full on at Maiza. There was a dark light in his eyes, not anger but more like great hatred.

The man glanced once more at the car and then at Maiza, and his expression hardened. "Make everyone in there come out."

"May I ask why?"

"I need to make sure there aren't any strange people with you."

Maiza privately wondered what the man's standards for strange were, but decided there was nothing to be gained from needlessly arguing. He heaved a small sigh and gave a signal to the two inside the car.

The townspeople's hostility diminished ever so slightly slightly as Czes hopped out. And when Sylvie stepped out from the back seat, their eyes widened.

She looked about sharply, then narrowed her eyes and leaned back against the car door in one smooth motion. At this, the animosity directed at them died down even more, and some of the men stared at her with emotion in their eyes quite different from what had been there before.

"...Is that it?"

Only the hairy man's glare refused to falter.

"You're very prudent," Maiza said jokingly in lieu of reply.

But the hairy man didn't react, instead saying, "I'm the mayor, Dez Nibil."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance. I'm—"

The hairy man - Dez - looked away, cutting off Maiza's introduction.

"I don't care to listen to outsiders. We can't accommodate you, so leave now."

"Come now. We're not asking you to let us sleep in one of your houses. If you would just stay here for a while in this car..."

"This village can't afford to get involved with foreigners right now. We don't want your trouble. It's because of outsiders like you that *that demon*—"

Dez suddenly closed his mouth.

A man's face suddenly rose to the forefront in Maiza's mind. The demon that had given them eternal life... and at the same time, the man who was his fellow camorrista, now far away in New York. But there was no way that he could be here, and now Maiza asked to make sure his suspicions were unfounded.

"Demon?"

"It's nothing. Leave this village... no, leave this forest, now."

"A demon, you said?"

The mayor snarled at Maiza's continued interest and reluctantly opened his mouth.

"...There's a *monster* living here."

A land cut off from the outside by a wall of trees, and a monster that attacked the village.

Such an occult setting sounded more like something that would be found in a fable or legend, but instead of mocking him, Maiza kept his silence and listened as Dez elaborated.

"You couldn't even begin to imagine how much that *thing* is tormenting us. No, you'd never believe me even if I told you."

"What exactly is this monster?"

"I've nothing more to say to you! Leave, now!"

Dez's anger made his breath steam white in the cold winter air. Maiza was silent for a moment and then, as though to confirm a theory, he muttered...

"...Elmer... Elmer C. Albatross."

A hubbub.

The air became charged with nervous energy.

The moment those words left Maiza's lips, the atmosphere changed in an instant. The slowly fading hostility came back full force, and even the men who had been lost in Sylvie's beauty suddenly shifted their gazes to Maiza, their heads snapping around like wind-up toys.

Even the mayor, who had until then kept the same flat expression, suddenly glared at them with wide eyes.

"You wretches..."

"We're looking for him. If he's not here, then we'll leave..."

"Grab them!"

The mayor's cry cut off Maiza's words and rang loudly in the street.

The villagers burst forward like waters from a floodgate. They looked almost like a pack of wild animals charging at their prey, but it seemed to Maiza as though there was another emotion in their eyes, apart from animosity.

...Fear?

He caught a glimpse of the terror in their eyes, but before he could make sure, the men were pushing forward, grasping at him.

But Maiza kept his calm, having predicted this from the start. Keeping his gaze steady, he stepped back, just barely avoiding the hands that sought to seize him.

"Please, calm down. We don't..."

The moment he looked to the mayor, he saw that the young man standing beside Dez was aiming his rifle.

"I see words will not suffice."

The loud retort of a gunshot shattered the quiet, and Maiza's body jolted from the impact.

"Maiza!" Sylvie screamed despite herself. Unlike Maiza, she hadn't felt the situation going pear-shaped, and had still been leaning against the car. Czes, on the other hand, had taken in the atmosphere in an instant and already scrambled back into the car.

The bullet shaved the skin off of Maiza's thigh in passing, ripping his thick pants and spraying blood in all directions.

As the villagers crowded forward, sensing an opening, the mayor was focusing on something else: the blood that had splashed out from Maiza's leg. A strong sense of foreboding grew in his chest as he stared at the crimson speckles on the stones.

And his worries were confirmed.

The blood that should have stayed on the ground *began to crawl across the earth.*

Possessed with life of their own, the spots of red gathered at Maiza's leg. As though dancing, the droplets merged with one another, and then ran up Maiza's leg and flowed into the rip in his pants, into his wound.

The townspeople who had been trying to tackle him noticed it as well. They froze in place and backed away, their faces pale with fear.

"He's the same..."

"A demon."

"He's just like him...!"

"We're going to die."

"We're going to be tainted."

"Don't look into his eyes..."

The villagers muttered furtively to each other, looking away from Maiza.

Maiza stopped, slightly suspicious.

Over the course of his life, he had, from time to time, been caught in the act of regeneration. Those who saw it felt terror and ran away from him. His boss, the head of a tidy criminal organization in New York, was one of the few exceptions.

But the reaction that these villagers showed was somewhat different from those that he'd observed through the years. Usually, those who saw him heal feared him as "an unknown thing," but... these people seemed to be fearing him as *a thing they were already familiar with.* It wasn't fear of the unknown that made them quail in terror. Instead it was the implications of what was entailed by a man who could heal from wounds in seconds.

...Ah. I see.

Maiza nodded inside and took in the situation once more.

The men who had backed away from him suddenly charged at Sylvie. From the way through glanced fearfully at him as they run, it looked like they were trying to take her hostage.

"Wait, what are you doing?"

Sylvie tried to twist away from the first man to reach her, but he was just a bit faster, and a rough hand grabbed hold of her slender wrist.

Maiza almost moved to save her, then stopped in his tracks. Behind her, the rear seat car window slowly lowered with a low whine. The young man who had grabbed Sylvie was so eager to bring her down that he didn't notice the light brown hand that emerged from the window until it was already clenched around his own wrist like a vise.

"Ack!"

The young man let out a startled cry and stepped away from Sylvie like he'd been burned. The arm jutting from the car swiftly drew back inside, dragging the young man's body with it.

"Aaaaaah!"

The young man's arm was halfway inside before he could even react. Shortly the low whine came again - someone in the car was closing the window while the youth's arm was still in it.

"Aaaaaugh..."

Tremendous pressure came down on the youth's arm. The window pane was not strong enough to sever his arm outright, but nevertheless it bit mercilessly into his flesh as the tortured sound of machinery filled the air.

Those surrounding Sylvie froze, unable to understand the situation. For her part, Sylvie peeked cautiously inside the car, then hurriedly backed away. As she reached the front of the car, the back door burst open - with the hapless village youth's arm still caught in the window.

"Yaaaaaagh!"

His feet left the ground and he began to fly bodily through the air, but the arm still stuck in the door would not allow it. A sick crack split the air, but the villagers were unable to discern whether the sound had come from the young man's bones or his joints.

And as the scream split the air, someone stepped out of the car...

"A... a monster?"



Unlike the reaction they had shown toward Maiza, the villagers' voices were now filled with fear of the unknown. The man who left the car was simply that strange.

He was clothed entirely in white silks, his sleeves cut short at the elbow to show his light brown skin. They were by no means thin clothes, but considering the freezing weather, they were more than enough to cause those watching him to shiver.

Just his clothes would not have been cause for such alarm, but the area above his neck, on the other hand, was.

A peculiar mask covered his face. It was an ornate thing, of a design that would not have looked out of place in southeast Asia, or at a festival in Hong Kong, burnished chocolate in color and accentuated with loud base reds and oranges.

Furthermore, what little could be seen behind the mask was not skin, but tightly wrapped bandages. In other words, this man had bound his head with cloth and then put on the mask. Through the eye holes, the townspeople could see half-lidded eyes, shining with sharp light.

Such a man had appeared. The villagers watching stirred up a tremendous ruckus, their worried voices filling the air.

The masked man ignored their reactions and calmly turned to Maiza.

"You drive like a madman. I will tell you again. I say this to you once more: are you trying to kill me?"

The mask hid his expression, but from the tone of his voice it was clear he was quite angry.

"Normally, I would lash out at you, or send you flying with a kick, but considering the situation, I will forgive you. I say this: I forgive you."

"Thank you. You have my eternal gratitude, Nile," Maiza said with a light shrug. He turned and spoke to the mayor's band, who were now almost paralyzed with shock.

"Ah, I must make it clear that this person wasn't riding with us - we were just 'carrying' him behind the back seat, if you will. Please don't misunderstand. We weren't trying to hide him."

But they weren't even listening. They could only stare wordlessly, unable to tear their eyes away from the nightmarish man in front of them.

The masked man, Nile, gave them a cursory glance and crossed his arms, turning his gaze to Maiza.



"I don't know what's going on, but it looks like they've calmed down, at least. But I ask you, Maiza. What do you want me to do?"

"Ah... I don't want trouble, so try not to hurt anyone," Maiza said, worrying more for the villagers than for Nile.

Nile nodded curtly and stepped around to the back of the car. With his foot on the spare tire hanging from the back, he hoisted himself up to the roof in one swift motion, crossing his arms once more and glaring down at the townspeople.

Once he was sure their eyes were on him, he spoke.

"Good. First, kneel. We'll talk once you do so."

His voice was low yet clear, carrying easily through the air. His demands were ridiculous, yet neither Sylvie nor Maiza protested, having become used to his habits long ago. But...

"Nile, these people don't understand English."

...perhaps it was for the better.

Silence hung over the gathered people for just a moment, and...

"What?!"

The voice from under the mask sounded just slightly taken aback.

"How dare you play me for a fool!"

"I would never dream of it. Weren't you listening? Not a word of the conversation so far has been in English."

"Mmm... so it's my mistake. I must acknowledge it. I will acknowledge my mistake, instead of trying to hide it! The problem is, the only languages I know how to speak besides the Berber languages are English, Chinese, and Indonesian. What shall I do?"

"Don't do anything. In fact, I'd rather prefer you come down before you end up damaging the car roof," Maiza said flatly, rubbing his forehead.

"The villagers are all frightened because you're talking in a language they don't understand," Sylvie said, finally finding her voice.

"Hmm."

Nile peered through his mask at the villagers, still arrogant. They were spread to surround Maiza and Nile in a loose half circle, consciously trying to put some distance between them and the two. The youth whose arm had been caught in the window had finally managed to wrench himself free, tears spilling down his face as he retreated to the rear.

If they had understood what Nile was saying, perhaps their hostility would have lessened due to his sheer audacity, but as it was they could only regard Nile's words as meaningless and frightening noise.

"I see... Maiza, I say this."

"What."

"We aren't going to get out of this peacefully."

"Indeed," Maiza replied, looking about.

Only the young men near the mayor had kept their calm. All of them had their rifles raised, pointed squarely at Maiza and Nile.

"Aim for their heads."

The men, hunters from the way they handled their firearms, adjusted their aim according to the mayor's orders.

"If they're anything like *him*, they won't be able to move for a while if you blow their heads away. If we can get even one of them, we'll be able to use them as a bartering chip against *him*."

Though objectively it looked like the villagers were at an advantage, not a single one among them was sure of victory. Even those who aimed their rifles found their palms slick with sweat.

Nile snorted.

"Go on, shoot. The moment you pull the trigger, I'll take you to be my enemies. I say this: I will slaughter you all!"

"And I'm telling you, they can't understand a word of English."

Even as he sighed and quipped flippantly at Nile, Maiza's eyes never left the rifle barrels.

...Now, what to do? Getting caught on purpose is one way to do it..."

Even as such thoughts flitted through Maiza's head, the hostile air coming from the villagers thickened once more.

Staring up at the clear blue sky above, Maiza came to a decision. He would make his comrades run, and allow himself to be captured. It was possible for all of them to make their escape together, but he didn't want to let go of this clue regarding Elmer's whereabouts if he could at all help it.

Maiza had left behind his position as financial executive of the New York camorra organization, the Martillo Family, to journey across the world. Not for the sake of tourism, but to find the immortals who had scattered all over the globe.

Over the course of three decades, he had traveled with Czes to find his old fellow alchemists. It had taken a considerable amount of time and effort just to find Sylvie and Nile, but to them, immortals in the truest sense of the word, such time meant little. And just when Maiza was about to give up on finding the remaining two, he came upon some information regarding one of them, Elmer C. Albatross. It was a tip from the information broker he frequented. It was not a vague clue - it detailed exactly the location of the village. But even the information broker hadn't deigned to describe the village in detail, instead covering it with the curt words, "trade secret." However, to Maiza, desperate for any kind of help, even that was a godsend.

He couldn't let go of this chance. He had eight months left until the time he'd promised to return to New York. If he lost track of Elmer here, he wouldn't have the time to make another try.

There was an element of impatience in his actions. That was why he had specifically mentioned Elmer's name, even after he had deduced from the townspeople's reactions that the demon they spoke of was most likely Elmer.

But even though he found himself at odds with the villagers, and Nile had brought this all upon himself, he couldn't allow Sylvie and Czes to become involved. After all, just because they were immortal didn't mean that they were immune to pain.

Just as Maiza turned to signal that he was giving himself up, he caught sight of something out of the corner of his eye. From where Maiza stood, they were approaching from the far side of the village, the opposite of where he and the others had emerged from the forest. The three unknown figures were each wearing bright red clothes, riding astride three horses.

Maiza froze, his back to the villagers, but they too stopped on the verge of charging him and gulped with suddenly dry mouths, catching sight of the three mounted figures.

"Look... the *messengers* are here."

"Lower your weapons!"

"Damn it all, this shouldn't be the day they come..."

"So they *were* demons, after all..."

Low worried mutters spread as some dropped their weapons, and others rushed into their homes and slammed the doors behind them. The many presences that had been staring at Maiza's party from the shadows vanished like a dream. Amidst the sudden hubbub, only the mayor and his cronies stood their ground, glaring at the trio in red clothes.

"What? What is it?"

"Hmm?"

Nile and Sylvie, too, heard the sound of horse's hooves and turned to look.

The horses stopped about ten meters away from the car. The three riders were women - no, from the looks of them they could still be called girls. They all looked similar, and Maiza surmised to himself that they might be sisters.

In addition to their red clothes, the white cloth stitched onto their sleeves brought to mind Santa Claus. It was a sight which seemed doubly unnatural when compared to the townspeople's antiquated clothing.

"...Master Dez."

One of them dismounted and timidly looked to the hostile mayor.

"These people are Master Elmer's guests. I would lead them to the castle."

"Wenchess..."

The mayor shot a glare that could have melted steel at the trio of girls.

Instead of the fear he had shown regarding Maiza or Nile, only disgust could be found on his features.

"Please, stand back. Master Elmer commands it."

The mayor kept his silence for a long moment, made a vague noise of distaste, and flicked his head to the townspeople. At his signal, those youths who were still left turned and walked away.

The village entrance, which up to the appearance of the girls had been a near-constant cacophony of raised voices, was dead silent. The atmosphere was hard to describe, and even Maiza found himself at a loss for words due to the unexpected intrusion.

The girl who had talked to the mayor finally broke the silence. She hooked one foot into the stirrups and spoke carefully to Maiza and the others.

"Umm... if you would please follow me, I would be most... ahh... obliged. This place... is dangerous."



CHAPTER 2
KIDOAIRAKU: SORROW
Czeslaw Meyer

The road leading into the forest

"What do you think, Maiza?" Czes asked nervously.

"Don't worry, Czes," Sylvie said before Maiza could open his mouth. "I'm sure Maiza doesn't mind that you ran and hid in the car at the first sign of trouble."

"N-not that! I just wanted to hear his opinion on those three girls!"

"Aha, I see now. Well in that case, I have to say that I think the one in the middle would look pretty good with you."

"Oh quit it! Stop making fun of me like that, Sylvie!"

"Aww, you really *are* too cute." Sylvie scooted up behind Czes and again draped her arms over his neck, paying no mind to the flaring of his cheeks.

Maiza chuckled and took pity on the boy.

"We'll be fine. Going over the information we've gleaned so far, I think it's safe to say that Elmer's waiting for us up ahead."

After the hubbub subsided and the villagers went back to their homes, Maiza and the others had decided to follow the girls in red. Judging from the reactions of the townspeople, they'd judged that the demon they spoke of was probably Elmer. They didn't know exactly why he'd come to be feared as a monster, but that was something they could ask him and find out.

For his part, Nile had clambered back into the trunk, covered himself with a thick fur blanket, and promptly fell back asleep.

"But... aren't they a little weird? They're really quiet, and compared to the village people, they're... I don't know. They've got similar features but it feels like they're from a different country..."

"In terms of oddity, I think the village itself is quite suspicious in itself," Maiza said. He began to sum up the situation.

"When I first claimed that we were just travelers, it seemed clear to me those people are unaware they're living on private property."

"Yeah, you have a point."

"If they had known, they could have just told us this place was private property and ordered us to leave. We don't have any sort of permit, so we'd have had no excuse to stay in that case. And not only that, the way that they speak the common language of this country is slightly different from the rest of this land's denizens. If I had to describe it, I would say it feels... archaic."

"You think they're some kind of cult, considering they're not on any of the maps we saw?"

Maiza gave Czes's suggestion a moment of thought, then shook his head.

"I don't think so. Think of what they called the monster - most probably Elmer, by the way. First they called it a demon, then later a monster. If they were religious, they would most likely have decided on a single name for such an aberration in accordance to their religious beliefs."

"So you're saying... it's just a normal village?"

"That too, is improbable, since that mayor was even pretty odd. The other people were simply afraid, but... he was a little different. From the moment he saw us, he classified us simply as outsiders. I believe that he was *the most knowledgeable* of the villagers."

Maiza cocked his head to one side, remembering the mayor's hateful eyes. Czes, on the other hand, merely sighed scornfully.

"Well, yes. He *was* the mayor, you know."

"No, I meant that on a more base level... Ah, it seems we've arrived," Maiza said, his slightly worried expression changing into mild surprise as he spied their destination through the trees.

Czes turned and looked as well, and Sylvie, too, moved up and looked alongside them.

It was an old castle.

To be more specific, it was a fortress surrounded by stone walls, of the sort that wouldn't have looked out of place in a fairy tale, or a fantasy novel, or a video game.

That wasn't to say that it was grand or impressive. It looked more like the sort of place that bandits or pirates would use as their stronghold than a king's castle. The walls had but meager decorations, and the overall feeling of the place was rather crude, but from the random and relatively sparsely positioned windows it seemed that the interior would be rather more complicated than the exterior suggested.

It looked fairly old, but none of the parts they could see were heavily damaged.

"It's like a castle you'd find in Luxembourg, or perhaps Belgium. In particular, it's very similar to the Vianden Castle in Luxembourg, though this is much smaller," Maiza said calmly.

Czes's expression hardened. "The style's not north European. And... somehow, it doesn't really look that old. I don't think it's even been a hundred years since this was built."

The entire wall except for the gate was surrounded completely by a thick barrier of trees, making it unfeasible to walk around outside it.

A lone gate allowed entrance into the castle, and the three horses that had been going ahead ran straight through the opened doors and vanished somewhere inside.

"...Do you suppose we can drive in?" Maiza mused thoughtfully, then shook his head and drove the car inside past the gate, parking it in the center of the courtyard.

He stepped out and looked closely at the castle once more.

"...I see..."

"...Elmer's definitely living here," Sylvie finished faintly, looking about as dumbfounded as Maiza felt.

There were Christmas decorations everywhere - the sheer number made Maiza heave a sigh unconsciously. Not only on the castle's gates, but hanging from every window were ornaments and trinkets. Not store-bought, but obviously made using resources that came from the village, each and every one unique and crafted with care.

"Only Elmer would go to such lengths for something so worthless."

Czes looked away after a cursory glance, but Sylvie eagerly stared at each one, entranced. It almost seemed like their souls had been transferred into each other's bodies.

"You're right," Sylvie said. "Elmer's the only one who'd go this far with decoration... at least, among the immortals who were on the boat."

"...Well, let's go in, shall we? I don't think those girls are going to come back to escort us. Sylvie, please go and wake up Nile."

"Okay."

As Sylvie opened the trunk, Maiza and Czes stepped toward the castle.

The huge castle door was made to open on a hinge, again contrasting with the overall look of the stone fort. It seemed more and more likely that the building hadn't been made that long ago.

Maiza knocked several times, but there was no response. Deciding that they were already illegal trespassers anyway, they decided to just go in.

"Excuse me."

The door wasn't locked. The ornament of Santa Claus and his reindeer hanging on the door shook as it swung open, creaking loudly. The two hesitated, then stepped forward and into the great hall within.

The hall had little decoration and wasn't much different from the outside of the castle, with the same stone walls and the same stone floor. However, the stairs they could see in the corner of the hall were not made of stone, but instead brought to mind the kind of staircase one might see in a 19th century mansion. The door in the corner, too, didn't look old at all.

"This place doesn't match up with itself. It's like they only took care to make the outside look like an old castle."

"Indeed. It feels like we've stepped into an art museum!"

An eerie creak cut off Maiza's words as the door behind them suddenly slammed shut. Before they could do more than whirl about, the windows closed themselves as well in quick succession, leaving the hall dusky and shadowed.

There was nobody behind them. Czes scrabbled at the door, but it was shut tight and refused to open.

Then, as though to fit the horror movie-like situation perfectly, a low chuckle drifted down from above their heads.

"Mwahahahahaha..."

The sound echoed around the wide hall, making it hard to tell where it was coming from.

"Pitiful creatures... Welcome to this cursed castle, this cursed forest... Perhaps the decorations outside lulled you into a false sense of security, but that was exactly as I intended, fools. Now, you shall be sacrificed before the altar that is my power...."

The voice threatened them with theatrical lines, but Czes and Maiza merely exchanged a quick glance and spoke as one.

"...Elmer?"

"Oh, so you know my name, do you? You must have heard it from the villagers. Your courage is admirable - few dare to utter a demon's name so lightly. But that is all, for even though you may resist..."

"Ahem. You're Elmer, right?"

"Come on! It's me!"

"I told you that it's useless to resist... eh...? Wait... what? Something's not quite right."

Perhaps due to the surprise, the hoarse voice in the darkness suddenly changed to that of a young man.

"It is you, Elmer... How long has it been since we last met? 290 years?" Maiza said, his voice more robust than normal from joy.

Czes didn't show his delight as obviously as Maiza, but nevertheless he smirked wryly and said, "You haven't changed a bit. I don't even need to lay eyes on you to know that."

Silence reigned in the dark. Just as the last echoes of Czes's voice faded, a huge surprised shout came from the shadows.

"Hold on a second! Is that... Czes... and Maiza?!"

The cry came from directly above their heads and *fell rapidly* toward them.

A dull thud came from right in front of them, then a hasty scrabbling noise as a dim silhouette sprang up in the dusky hall.

"Hey! Be a dear and open up the shutters on the windows, will you?" the shadow shouted, and in response to his call the shutters flew open one by one. It was as if the wind had blown them open, for Czes and Maiza could see nobody near the windows in the sudden sunlight.

"Nifty, isn't it? I made it so that you can open and close them just by pulling a rope from afar!" the silhouette boasted, its identity finally revealed by the illumination from outside.

"Ah, what a long time it's been! Let me see your fa..."

Both Maiza's joyous advance and his words trailed off abruptly as he caught sight of the man's face.

The man was wearing clothes as quaint as Nile's.

He was clothed entirely in black, and wearing a sack dyed black over his head, with only two holes cut out for his eyes. It was as though he was trying to recreate the style of a Japanese kuroko.³

"...What in the world are you wearing?"

"Hmm? Oh, this! Sorry, sorry! I thought that dressing up like this would make it easier to scare people, you see. A huge writhing shadow in the darkness, eh? Hahaha."

The man chuckled and pulled the sack off his head. Even the gloves he wore had been carefully dyed black.

"Aaah, now I can breathe. Honestly, now. And I was so looking forward to putting on a show, too. It's been a while since I've had guests."

The man under the sack was grinning, with blue eyes underneath a crop of slightly sweaty gold hair. He wasn't particularly handsome, but on the other hand not ugly either, an entirely ordinary person who looked best when he was smiling.

The tension finally drained from Maiza's shoulders at the sight of Elmer's face, and he stepped forward and clapped his hands on Elmer's shoulders. His eyes were alight with simple delight, like a young child's, and it seemed as though he might burst into tears at any moment.

"Aaah... You really haven't changed at all!"

"Haha! It's Maiza! It's really you, Maiza! And Czes! My, my! You... Ack! It's really you, Czes! My god! It's really Czes, what do I do, Maiza?! I don't think there's any way to express this joy welling up inside me except for exploding except that unfortunately I have neither a fuse nor a trigger and it would probably hurt like the dickens anyway so I think I'll refuse! No no that's not it what do I do I'm really stumped what ever shall I do?"

"I think that you should calm down first of all."

The emotional high receded and Maiza snickered quietly, remembering what had just happened.

"And really... 'Mwahahaha'? You're not a child anymore, Elmer. I was embarrassed just listening to you."

"Eh? Did I sound odd?"

³ A stage hand dressed entirely in black who moves props and scenery in kabuki plays, meant to be treated as invisible by the people watching.

"You didn't know?"

Czes had been standing slightly away from Elmer and Maiza, and he finally piped up.

"If you were trying to scare us, you failed spectacularly. It was actually pretty funny."

But Elmer only snickered despite Czes's biting words.

"Funny, eh. A smashing success, then! It's not every day that you can make someone laugh while trying to scare them! I'd say it's about eighty percent better!"

"Do you know about the expression 'wry grin'?"

"Ahahaha! So what if it's wry as long as it's a smile? No no no no, I was surprised, really! How did you get here? Did you know I was here?"

Elmer grabbed Maiza in a fierce hug and pounded him on the back.

Maiza and Czes, however, were too confused to reply. Hadn't Elmer know they were down in the village? Wasn't that why he'd sent his messenger to bring them to the castle?

"Elmer, you didn't know that we were here?"

"Ah... No no no no. All I heard was that outsiders had come to the village. The townspeople are pretty unfriendly, and I've riled them up a lot, so I decided to hide you all before something nasty happened!"

It was a fair distance from the castle to the village. Who had he heard it from? And furthermore, just why was he hiding away in a castle like this, feared as a demon by the villagers?

Maiza had countless amount of questions on the tip of his tongue, but he decided to shelve them for the moment and bask in the joy of reunion.

Just then, a booming knock came from the closed door. It seemed that Sylvie and Nile were standing outside.

"Hmm? What's this? You two didn't come alone?"

"Of course not. We've two more with us - old friends," Maiza said warmly.

Czes grinned. "So, can you guess who they are?"

"Eh? I wonder who. Let's see, if they're friends of yours, maybe Veg, or... ah, I don't know! Yes, yes, coming!"

Elmer lost the brief battle with his curiosity and threw the door open expectantly. It seemed that he had some sort of device rigged to the door, the same as the windows, and just by pulling a rope he could make it swing open or closed.

"Elmer? Elmer, is that really you?!"

"Greetings."

On the other side stood an almost supernaturally beautiful woman, and a man with a mask over his bandage-swathed head.

Elmer let the door close slowly and turned to face Maiza.

"...Who?"

"I wonder?" Maiza replied, a rare impish smile on his features. Beside him, Czes struggled desperately to hold in his laughter.

The door opened from the outside with a tortured shriek as Nile forced it open, and the two - to Elmer - strangers jumped inside.

"Aaaah! Unknown visitors! Strangers have invaded my castle!"

"Elmer, you jerk! You slammed the door in our faces without even saying hello!"

Sylvie's voice was angry, but the corners of her mouth kept twitching suspiciously, as though she, too, was trying hard not to laugh.

"You scoundrel. Perhaps I was too optimistic, expecting you to be serious at least on the momentous occasion of our reunion."

Nile, on the other hand, sounded genuinely put out.

"Who, who, who are you people?! You're trespassing not only inside my castle but inside my heart as well! Reveal yourselves!"

Sensing Elmer's genuine confusion, Nile remembered the state of his head.

"Mmm, I see... I didn't wear a mask like this back then, did I. Perhaps your confusion is understandable. But I say this: you should have recognized my voice."

"...Nile? Nile, is that you?!"

"Took you long enough."

Nile nodded, satisfied. Elmer stared hard at him for a moment, then switched his gaze to Sylvie.

"Then you would be... right!"

"Surprised, aren't you? I guess you would be, since I've changed so much."

"You're Huey! Huey Laforet, aren't you! Why're you dressed like a woman?"

"I'm not!" Sylvie screeched, taken aback at the utterly unexpected reply as the others chuckled good-naturedly.

"Eh, you're not? I'm wrong? I could've sworn that Huey was the only one on that boat who was this pretty..."

"It's Sylvie. Sylvie Lumiere," Maiza said, laughing.

Sylvie groaned and said, "Honestly, Elmer. I was the only woman on the boat, remember?"

"Sylvie?"

Elmer fixed the woman standing before him with a long stare, then whipped around to look at Maiza.

"You're joshing me! Sylvie wasn't a stunning lady like this! She was a *homely* country girl!"

"Should I be flattered? Or angry?" Sylvie mumbled, a complicated expression on her face.

Elmer turned to her again and said, "No, well, but... Even if you changed your glasses to lenses, you weren't that tall, and you were, err, a bit flatter, if you know what I mean. Hold on, you were just seventeen back then! You look like you're in your mid-twenties now! There's no way you could have grown like that, since Czes is still the same..."

"Sylvie didn't drink the Grand Panacea immediately."

Maiza cut in, forestalling the flood of questions that Elmer had yet to voice. Sylvie smiled and explained eagerly.

"I became an alchemist because I wanted to be beautiful forever. When I *did* find the elixir of eternal life, though, I was only seventeen. I still had a lot of growing to do. So I put the panacea in a small vial and drank it after years of taking care of myself."

Elmer looked over her with a skeptical eye.

"...So what you mean is, you're a twentysomething version of Sylvie?"

"What do you mean, version? Well, I suppose you could put it that way."

Elmer gave it a moment of thought and placed a hand on her shoulder, gazing at her with pitying eyes.

"Sylvie, before we all enjoy this reunion, I want you to answer me just one thing honestly."

"What is it?" Sylvie asked, her pulse quickening just slightly at Elmer's suddenly serious expression.

"It's okay. I won't condemn you no matter what you say. We've got all the time in the world, so you can atone for your sins over time."

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"Tell me truthfully now... just how many baths did you take in the blood of children to gain that beauty?!"

"Elmer, do you realize just how rude you're being right now?"

Sylvie drew her hand back to slap him, but he evaded it by a hairsbreadth and turned once more to Maiza.

"Right then, that's enough joking around."

"Tell me, how much was a joke and how much was serious?"

"To be completely honest, I knew from the beginning that you were Sylvie. Ahahahahaha!"

Sylvie just sighed and raised her right hand high again.

"Hey, now... Eh?"

Elmer threw himself back to avoid the slap, but suddenly found himself held in place. Maiza stood at his right and Nile at his left, firmly grasping his arms.

"Elmer, that was a bit out of bounds."

"I say this: you deserve more than a slap for what you just said."

Their grip on Elmer's arms was so tight that his feet actually lifted off the ground a little.



"Huh? Wait. Eh? Hey!"

Sylvie's palm swooped majestically through the air at Elmer's face and...

Czes stood a short distance away from the rest and looked up aimlessly at the ceiling as a resounding smack rang in the air.

"Ah, Elmer and Sylvie both haven't changed a bit. Not inside," he muttered quietly to himself, low enough to be inaudible to the others. He seemed somehow old.

"...Maybe I'm the only one who's changed."

They are smiling. Master Elmer is smiling, and so are the outsiders who came to the castle.

They are laughing happily, very happily.

Master Elmer has not changed at all. The same smile, the same laughter he always shows me.

But I... cannot laugh.

If I could but

like the people Master Elmer has invited

if I could but laugh like that, how...

But I cannot laugh. I cannot smile sincerely.

Though Master Elmer smiles genuinely for me.

Though he strives to teach me how to do so myself.

But all I can remember is sorrow.

Most probably, I cannot laugh because of that sorrow...

But right now, I am sad because I cannot laugh.

"Anyway, this place is pretty dirty, but if you want you can stay here for a while!"

"You'd think this was actually *your* house."

"Don't say that, Czes. You're hitting me where it hurts... Aah."

Elmer flopped down onto the sofa next to the fireplace, the imprint of a hand still glowing bright red on one cheek.

The group had decided to take the conversation somewhere more comfortable, and moved from the hall to an adjacent room that looked like a parlor.

"This is all the people who've come today, eh... What about the others? Are there any others still safe?" Elmer asked, getting up to start a fire in the fireplace. It was a crucial question, and Maiza and the others exchanged uneasy looks upon hearing it.

After a moment of shaky silence, Maiza spoke for them.

"...Including the five of us here, only nine of the original thirty from the boat have survived."

Elmer was quiet for a while. Silence fell over the five immortals, as the firelight tainted Elmer's bowed head a fierce red.

A few seconds later Elmer turned his face toward Maiza and the others... and smiled.

"I see. That's sad, but also good news."

"What?"

Elmer collapsed into a wooden chair, his expression brighter for some reason.

"Tell you the truth, there was the distinct possibility that I'd live forever without ever meeting any of you. But today, you all came. So the worst case scenario changed from only me left, to only us five left. But then you tell me that there's others as well. Right, this is occasion for a smile. I think this is a fine situation to smile in."

"You're a positive thinker."

"Not quite. Smiling is the only way I can mourn for the others' deaths. To be honest, I'm not that good at being sad. It's hard. And I don't like it either. Ah, I'll make this much clear - I'm never going to forget the dead. So tell me who's left, so I can know who to remember."

Explanation regarding his lack of sorrow complete, Elmer proceeded to prod Maiza for more information. Maiza looked dumbfounded for a moment, then smiled as though relieved.

"You truly haven't changed one bit. Yes, then. The ones left besides us are Veg, Huey, Victor..."

"Ah, Huey's still around, is he? I read in a paper a long time ago that Victor found a job in the FBI, and he caught Huey."

Elmer smiled lightly, as though remembering a fond memory.

"What's Huey doing these days? I heard rumors that he'd been sent to prison, but I'm guessing he's probably already served his sentence, right?

"We don't know, either. We've heard nothing about him being eaten, so perhaps he's still out there somewhere, continuing his experiments."

"Huey did so love to test things, didn't he. I suppose you could say that he was the most alchemist-ish of us... Ah, sorry, sorry. I interrupted you," Elmer said, cutting himself off as Maiza frowned.

"No, it's fine. And as for the last person, we still haven't managed to find where he is. Denkuro. Tougo Denkuro. You remember him, don't you? He was the only Asian on the boat."

"Aah, you mean Ninja."

"Ninja?"

"It's the nickname I gave him... Eh? You haven't met him yet?"

The others all stared at him with wide eyes.

"You met him?!"

Elmer shrugged uncomfortably at Maiza's startled cry.

"Well, I just sort of stumbled across him about a decade ago. He was dressed as a ninja in a place called Edo Village or something in Japan. I haven't seen him since, so I can't tell you for certain whether he's still alive..."⁴

"I can't believe it... the first place we looked was Japan. He always said he wanted to go back to Japan even back then on the boat, so we searched around his old home..."

"When?"

⁴ Nikko Edo Village, a theme park based on the style and appearance of old Edo. One of the attractions is the Ninja Theater, where actors dressed as ninja put on several performances per day.

"About twenty years ago."

Elmer waved his hand and laughed.

"Aah, that wouldn't work. Of course not. He only went back to Japan around a decade ago. He said he tried to walk from America to Japan, but he ran into some trouble at the North Pole and got buried in ice for around 250 years."

Stunned silence.

"He got caught by a Soviet nuclear submarine, chased by the KGB, ran away to Germany and got shot as he tried to go over the Berlin Wall. So he hid in an East German's house until the wall fell and finally managed to get back to Japan. He said it was a huge shock, how much his country'd changed. As for his house, it was destroyed a long time before even the war... around when Japan opened its doors in the 19th century. So he ended up just wandering around the country."

"A grand adventure."

Tougo's story ended with Nile's succinct summary. Elmer mulled over things for a moment and then got to the heart of the matter.

"I noticed that Szilard wasn't mentioned."

The others save Maiza looked away from him, each of them holding different thoughts.

Szilard Quates had been the oldest man on the Advena Avis to gain immortality, and the one who had wished to gain absolute knowledge through eating other immortals.

Maiza chose to answered Elmer's unspoken question simply.

"Szilard is dead."

A complicated expression spread over Elmer's face. On the one hand it seemed he looked deeply relieved, and on the other he looked somewhat desolate.

"...I see. So including Denkuro, that's nine."

Maiza nodded after a moment's hesitation.

"That would be the case, yes."

"Were you looking for me just to tell me that?"

Maiza gave him a wan smile and nodded again.

Elmer suddenly fell over onto the floor and began coughing violently, flailing his arms and legs like a cicada that had been flipped over.

"Are you all right?"

"Fo, forced myself to laugh! Stomach acid! Ca, came up! Into my e-e-esophagus! I'm dying! I'm dying!"

Every time he tried to draw a breath, he coughed more, unable to even breathe properly. Elmer started to drown in the open air, three grand centuries of memories flashing before his eyes.

"And that's why you shouldn't have done it."

"I say this: you are a fool. Furthermore, didn't you think it would be rude to Maiza to laugh in a situation like this?"

Knowing Elmer's immortality, Sylvie and Nile didn't budge an inch from their seats. Maiza got up and rubbed his back, while Czes crouched to look at Elmer's face with a worried expression.

"Are you okay?"

Czes moved his right hand forward, onto Elmer's cheek. And slowly, his palm moved upwards to Elmer's forehead... but Elmer didn't react at all.

"Ah, I'm fine now. Thanks, Czes."

Wordlessly, Czes withdrew his hand and returned to his seat. His childish face was clouded with a sort of dissatisfaction.

"Hmm?"

Elmer noticed Czes's dark expression and opened his mouth to ask what was wrong.

"Now then, Elmer. It's your turn to answer our questions," Maiza said, drawing Elmer's attention. Czes's troubled face quickly receded into the back of his mind and was forgotten.

"What do you want to know? I do know a few national security level secrets, but I don't think I could tell them to you..."

"We don't really care about that."

"Are you sure? I really do know secrets about the Republic of Nauru."

"I'm serious," Maiza said, the light in his eyes unwavering despite Elmer's attempts to laugh it off.

"What is this village? Why do they fear you and call you a demon? Are you actually tormenting them? And those girls, who are-"

"Don't ask me all at once! I'm getting confused! Confusedfusedfusedfusedfused."

Elmer grabbed his head in both hands and began to shake, slowly at first but then faster and faster. His head became a blur-

-and suddenly *fell off*.

Everyone froze, their breath catching in their throats. The head rolled about halfway down his body and disappeared into the swath of black cloth, and at the same time thick smoke billowed out from where his neck had been.

The smoke filled the room in an instant, temporarily hiding everything from view. It burdened the lungs slightly when breathed in, but it didn't seem to be poisonous, and so Maiza and the others ignored it, crouching and trying to see where Elmer was.

Shortly, the smoke thinned out and they could see... the black clothes that Elmer had been wearing, and a canister rolling on the ground that had probably been the source of all the smoke.

"Tricky as ever, I see..." Maiza said, glancing around through what remained of the gas. He could see nothing moving - Elmer had most likely cut and run the moment the smoke began to spread.

"Like you always see the magicians do it," Czes said flatly, looking over the black cloth. "He disappeared and left his clothes behind."

At that moment...

"A game! How about a game?"

Elmer's voice rang inside the room. It echoed strangely off the stone walls, reverberating around them happily.

"I would appreciate it if you stopped playing around."

"I'm going to hide from you lot for a month starting from now, continuing my work! If you can catch me I'll tell you everything you want to know as a reward!"

"Elmer."

"Give it up, Maiza," Czes said. "You know as well as I do that once Elmer's set his mind on something like this you can't make him change it."

Maiza gave up, accepting Czes's words.

"Very well..."

"Okay! Smashing! I knew you'd understand, Maiza! Now then, I'll welcome you once more! Allow me to introduce you to this village, frozen in time, no, wait, actually, to this village, which exists by itself in an isolated alternate dimension! In other words, it's four dimensional! Fantasy! I'll eagerly awaiting your serious roleplaying!"

With that last, Elmer's voice burst into laughter which slowly faded away, the last echoes dying down quickly. Maiza slumped down onto a chair and heaved a great sigh.

"I suppose I should be used to this, considering what happened all the time in New York."

"Right, though Isaac and Miria are naturals at this sort of thing, unlike Elmer."

"Who're those?" Nile asked, unfamiliar with the names, but before Czes and Maiza could reply, a knock came at the door.

The door was made out of wood and contrasted curiously with the stone walls, and from the other side came the soft voice of a girl.

"Aah... I have prepared some tea."

"Ah, my apologies. Come in," Maiza said, temporarily taking the place of the master of the house.

"Excuse me."

The girl who walked in was clothed in red just like the others, but she was different from the three who had been riding on horses. Very similar, but the style of her hair and the lines of her face were again subtly different.

She noticed that Elmer was not in the room and stopped, nervously glancing about.

"Elmer said for us to find him, but perhaps we could just ask this girl where he is," Nile suggested.

Czes stepped forward, his body language changing to that of a young boy.

"Hey, what's your relation to Elmer?" he asked, abusing the right that was only given to children, to ask blunt questions without concern for social niceties. The girl, in turn, replied equally frankly.

"I... am *a sacrifice*."

The people had no way of knowing how long the village had existed. The old ones sometimes hinted that they knew more than they let on, but time passed and they passed on one by one, taking their knowledge with them to the grave.

The villagers who formed the majority of the town now were those who had grown up knowing nothing but the town, and to them the tightly grouped trees that grew around them was the same as waterfalls leading off the edge of the world.

Curious ones tried to get through the forest, and their hopes and thirst for knowledge were always left unfulfilled, unquenched.

They didn't even know that the trees grew unnaturally close to one another, for they had never learned what was natural in the first place.

The forest was much too large to traverse on foot. Many turned back, defeated, and some among them never returned. The villagers whispered to one another that the forest destroyed one's sense of direction, that it led would-be travelers astray and forced them to walk the same paths over and over. The only road that existed had had a tunnel in the middle, blocked off by a locked door, but recently the tunnel had collapsed, making that road completely impossible to take.

And there was another road, leading deep into the forest, where from time to time came the peddler.

But that road had a gate, and was designed so that nothing but the peddler's steel carriage, which moved by itself, could pass. In years gone by a few had smuggled themselves onto the back of the carriage and ridden away... but they, too, had never returned.

The villagers realized the danger of "outside" and taught their children accordingly.

The outside is dangerous. There is nothing there. The village is everything.

The children knew that these were lies. But the atmosphere of the village made such opinions impossible to voice... and besides, the children were gripped with great fear regarding what lay beyond the village's bounds.

There were shining silver birds that sometimes flew high in the sky above them. Huge beyond imagining and giving voice to strange and fearsome cries, the birds seemed like a devil's messengers, spreading terror amongst the townspeople.

But the devilish birds aside, the village was not such a bad place to live. It was mostly self-sufficient, and the peddler brought them oil to light their fires. The peddler himself was the decisive proof that something existed "outside," but the villagers pretended not to notice. The peddler never talked about the outside world, and in fact never left his carriage, or even lowered the window.

There was an unspoken rule that discouraged talk of the peddler, and the previous mayor had set rules in place forbidding anyone to go outside the village. The rules were accepted by everyone as completely natural, and life went on without much disturbance.

There were problems, of course. No matter how much the villagers were unable to leave even if they had wished to do so, from time to time people came to the town, saying that they had come from outside. All of them seemed to have stumbled across the village by chance, and some of them could not even speak the language. But... most of the villagers could not understand the concept of "outsider," for there was no such thing as outside in the first place. To them, such people were nothing more than dangerous demons.

For example, a handful of the village youths had chosen to follow the first outsider who ever visited, charmed by his descriptions of the world beyond. They left with the outsider, ignoring the worries of their elders, their heads filled with stories of outside.

And none of them ever came back.

They had been seduced by a demon, everyone agreed.

After that, the appearance of outsiders was *ignored*.

When they did come, perhaps once a decade if that, they were chased off immediately... or they were, literally, erased from the face of the earth.

Fearing the outside, fearing the possibility that their lives as they knew them could be denied outright, they stayed inside the forest.

There were some worries about depopulation, but still everyone lived relatively happily, spending their days in quiet peace.

At least, until that fateful day five years ago, when the demon known as Elmer came...

...And the present day.

The night after Maiza and his friends left the village, the important figures of the village were all gathered around a small table. As one, their expressions were grim, and some among them even showed fear.

It was not a frivolous matter. The air itself was still and heavy, crushing down on the people in the wooden room oppressively as though any moment a firestorm might explode upon them.

"What are we going to do, mayor?"

"I didn't see it myself. Are the rumors making the rounds true?"

"There are more demons now? Explain what's going on!"

"What's going to happen to this village?! Has that thing said anything?"

The mayor, Dez Nibil, sat quietly and ignored the townspeople's nervous cry, a sour expression on his face as though he'd bitten a lemon.

"Do something! There are four more of them?! Are all of them demons?!"

Instead of the mayor, one of the youths chose to reply. He was the man who had shot Maiza in the leg earlier in the day.

"Yes, I saw it with my own eyes. Just like that thing. I don't know about the other three, but the one with glasses on is an ally of the demon for certain!"

"And the one wearing the frightful mask was talking in a strange language. It's got to be a code that only they can understand. A tongue of curses!"

"Bu, but do you think that woman was a demon too?"

"Well, err, I... I guess. Wait, no, no, maybe she's not."

Those who had been entranced by Sylvie's beauty found it hard to make a judgment regarding her.

"And he hid quickly, but I saw a child too."

"Right, that's four including the child. Whatever the circumstances, they left for the castle once Elmer called them. But... that thing they were riding... do you think they have anything to do with the peddler?"

"The peddler's not our concern right now. The important matter is what we're going to do from now on. Don't you think, mayor?"

All the villagers fell silent and turned to Dez.

He heaved a great sigh and muttered in a low voice, like he was talking to himself.

"I was hoping to grab them before they could contact that thing, but... from the way he sent messengers, I think he knew that they had arrived. The problem is, what will they do to us, considering we threatened them with weapons?"

"We know that much! What we're asking is, what are we going to do about it?!"

"We don't have a choice! We just have to wait and see what he'll say! We can't make any sort of plan without knowing anything!" the mayor shouted angrily, but the villagers refused to back down.

"If they come in the night looking for revenge, we're done for!"

"And if they decide to ask for more... we'll have to start drawing from our stored crops."

"They'd starve us to death!"

"You're the mayor, aren't you?! Do something!"

"Enough!"

Dez slammed his fist down on the table and shouted, a vein pulsing on his forehead.

"What do you want me to do! Use your heads a little before yipping like frightened dogs! Do you have any good ideas? Do you have anything, any plans that can kill them or force them



to leave? The only difference between you and I is that I'm the mayor and you're not! If you want, I'll pass on the position to any one of you! Let us see just how great a plan you can come up with! Let us see just how well you can lead the village!"

None of the villagers could say anything in reply. None among them could think of a plan except to wait and see.

Then, a strong voice cut through the silence from behind Dez.

"That was a bit harsh, father."

"Felt. This doesn't concern you."

A boy who looked to be in his mid-teens stood in the door. There were still traces of baby fat on his face, but the light in his eyes was already strong and clear.

"The villagers are just nervous. So am I. That's why we're all looking to you for support, father."

Dez kept his silence.

"This isn't the time to argue like this. We have to band together in times of hardship to protect the village."

His words were so frank they almost sounded childish, but nevertheless they served to soothe the villagers, who had been on the verge of losing their calm.

"For now, we have to do as father says and watch to see what happens. The child and the woman might just be hostages or prisoners... and we might be able to discover a weakness. We should pretend to obey and bide our time, waiting for a chance to present itself."

The villagers looked at each other, considering the boy's proposal. There was a brief flurry of discussion, after which most of them voiced their approval, and it was decided that for the time being they would keep things as they were.

"This is fine, right, father?"

"Do as you will," Dez said sourly, getting up to leave the room, perhaps put out that his son had taken his position.

Then, one of the villagers voiced a question to his retreating back, uneasiness clear on his face.

"But mayor, if they ask for more sacrifices..."

"I know. We only have one left. If we run out, then we'll *really have to start offering up the village maidens...*"

An angry voice comes from the town hall as I make my way to my shack to sleep. It is Master Dez's voice.

Perhaps I have made another mistake, though I do not remember doing so.

I do not wish to do so, but I must make certain.

The town hall is raised slightly from the ground. As I walk up the stairs I realize that there are many people inside. They are probably discussing Master Elmer. Perhaps the shout just now has nothing to do with me.

As I reach the door, it opens suddenly.

Shock.

The door knocks me down and I fall down on the floor.

My nose hurts. I touch it and realize that it is bleeding.

"Blast, this door just refuses to open, doesn't it!"

Master Dez's voice comes from above my head. The next moment, stabbing pain assails my body over and over in quick succession.

"Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!"

Master Dez glares down at me as he opens and closes the door again and again, slamming it into my body.

I twist my body away and just barely manage to keep the door from impacting against me again.

But I lose my balance as I try to stand and fall over, this time sprawling in the doorway. Crushing pain suddenly makes itself known against my legs.

"Ah, *now it just won't close!*"

Again and again, agony assaults my senses.

Painpainpainpainpainpainpainpainpainpainpainpainpainpainpainpainhurtsithurt
sithurtsithurtsithurtsithurtsithurts...

I lose the ability to express what I feel in words, and my body curls up of its own accord and grows still.

The shocks stop, and from above my head I can hear Master Dez's agitated voice.

"Aah, you useless wench, you've gotten blood all over the doorway! Clean it up before dawn!"

After Master Dez leaves, in a foul mood, the rest of the villagers leave as well, stepping over my body.

"How unsettling..."

"Was she eavesdropping...?"

"Honestly..."

The villagers avoid my body like they would avoid the corpse of a dog. Frowning at me and talking about me as though I am something dirty.

This happens all the time. This is nothing new. But why does it concern me so now? Perhaps it is because of Master Elmer's guests.

By the time I manage to drag myself to my feet, only Master Felt is standing in front of me.

"It doesn't look like you're that hurt. Are you alright?"

Master Felt gives me a pitying look and then takes his leave, tossing a comment over his shoulder.

"...If they ask for another sacrifice, it'll probably be your turn. Do it for the good of the village. I'm sorry."

Master Felt does not hit me or despise me.

But he does not help me, either.

I know that. Nothing will change.

This is merely my lot. I do not have to think of anything.

Nothing will change. Nothing is wrong. Every day will continue after the one before it, constant and steady.

But even then, aah, but even then.

Why do those who come from outside treat me kindly?

They do not hit me, they do not kick me, they do not become angry if I dare to sleep in a bed.

Perhaps Master Elmer is the only exception.

That thought had been the only thing that kept me going.

I already knew.

The possibility of a different world that exists beyond this village, beyond this forest.

Then why must I live here, treated like this.

Master Elmer told me that there might be places better than this, but on the other hand there were much worse places as well. But I wish to believe in the minuscule chance of a better tomorrow as long as that possibility exists.

I want to leave. Anywhere but this village. If I can live without being hit without being hurt without being lonely then anywhere, anywhere...

But that is a dream I cannot have.

A hope that will never come to be.

Because leaving this place would mean my death.

It would have been better if I had remained ignorant, if I had not had cause to have such impossible dreams, such futile hopes...

I am sad. I almost found myself hating the one who gave me smiles, the one who taught me happiness, Master Elmer.

I remember. I remember clearly.

This feeling is... hate.

I hated Master Elmer before I even hated the villagers.

That makes me sadder than anything.

I feel like I am something that should not exist in this world...

December 23rd, Night

The old castle

Night fell.

The darkness, so clear as to seem almost frozen, made the already frigid forest air itself shiver with cold.

The roof of the old castle in the forest was constructed as a flat plane, so that one could walk around on it like an apartment rooftop. Only the roof of the watchtower jutting from the south had been made a cone, making it hard to climb.

A man lay on the slope of the cone, looking up at the stars.

"Elmer."

The man quietly looked down at the sound of this name.

"Ah."

At the edge of his vision, he saw the upper body of a young boy. The lower half of his body was hidden by the roof's edge, as he struggled to climb up onto the roof. At length Czes made his way completely onto the rooftop.

Elmer congratulated him as he caught his breath, clearly exhausted.

"So you found the handholds next to the window. I'm impressed," Elmer said frankly. "Did you come alone?"

Czes didn't reply, instead choosing to look around.

"This castle is really weird. The overall design is like a fortress in Luxembourg, but this cone type of roof is more often found in Denmark... it seems like it's been made from a hodgepodge of a bunch of different castles."

"You're a smart one. I'm surprised... I didn't know any of that."

"Half of it comes from Maiza's observations."

"Haha, so what do you say we add some roof tiles and a gargoyle or two while we're at it?"

Czes gave Elmer a bright smile and carefully began to walk across the slanted cone roof.

Elmer saw him approaching and suddenly jumped to his feet. Just a slight misstep and he would have gone plummeting down to the ground below, but not a hint of worry could be seen on his face.

"Heheheh, you might think you've got me cornered, but you'll see that you're wrong! You think you'll be able to chase me, Elmer 'God Foot' Albatross, down?"

"Where're you going to run?" Czes pointed out calmly.

Elmer looked around and gave it a moment of thought.

"...Eh?"

There were no parts of the roof that he could move to, and even from the lowest point he could reach, jumping down to the ground would surely end with far worse than a broken bone or two. He might be immortal, but things that hurt still hurt. Sweat beaded finely on his forehead as he stood in place.

"Well, uhh, if you come here, then I'll run to the other side of this cone."

"And we'll run around and around forever?"

"What do you think about participating in a test that could shake the foundations of modern science, to see how many times we have to run around this to turn into butter?"⁵

"I'll refuse," Czes replied flatly, and Elmer cocked his head to one side.

"I think the person who first thought of making tigers into butter had to be a genius, don't you think?"

"You don't have to try and distract me. I'm not here to catch you. I just want to talk."

Czes sat down where he was and leaned his small body against the slanted roof.

"Talk? I tooold you, if you can't catch me I won't-"

"Not about that. It's personal."

"Hmm?"

Elmer stepped a little closer, intrigued at Czes's sudden seriousness.

⁵ From "The Story of Little Black Sambo" by Helen Bannerman, a story where an Indian boy named Sambo tricks four greedy tigers into chasing each other around a tree until they turn into butter.

"Anyway, you still like to go up to high places at night, don't you. I remember that you used to go up into the crow's nest every night to look at the stars back then."

"Ah... Aaah... Aaah, so that's it. That's how you knew I'd be up here? I didn't expect to be found on the very first day, you know. I was quite surprised."

"What, were you planning on really hiding for a month straight?"

Instead of replying, Elmer put one hand on the incline and raised his body into a nearly upright position, turning to face Czes fully.

"So, what do you want to talk about?"

He knows that I'd have a hard time starting the conversation.

Czes let out an uneasy sigh as he realized Elmer's intentions.

Then, making up his mind, he gave Elmer a false smile and opened his mouth to speak.

But before he could say anything, Elmer cut him off.

"Don't force your smiles. It doesn't suit you," he said calmly.

Czes took a sharp breath, his face going utterly blank.

A moment later, a strangely mature expression found its way onto his features. He glared at Elmer, the air about him completely different from before.

"And I see that you're as ill-natured as always."

"Eh? Why're you suddenly acting like an adult now?"

"...What?"

Confusion shook Czes. He'd thought that Elmer had seen through his true nature and given him a warning not to hide himself.

"You didn't catch onto my act?"

"No, well, all I was talking about was that fake smile of yours, not your... eh? What? You were acting?"

"I see that I was the fool here..." Czes muttered, bowing his head tiredly, and Elmer finally realized what was going on.

"Ah! Ah, that's right, I've got it now. Right, I understand. Okay. Leave it to me. That's it, yes, I don't know why I didn't see it before. I should have realized it was strange that you were still acting like a kid after three hundred years. Right, sorry, sorry for not noticing."

Czes merely looked up at the sky and sighed at Elmer's sly reply. And as the white steam of his breath curled up into the darkness, the immortal who looked like a boy quietly began to speak.

"The strange thing is, Maiza hasn't mentioned that once in the seventy years since I met him again. I don't think that Sylvie or Nile have noticed, either."

His still childlike eyes were shining with anxiety.

"I have one question. What do you think of us?"

"Companions."

Not a hint of hesitation. Elmer's answer came short and simple, the moment the question came from Czes's mouth.

Czes's eyes widened in surprise, and Elmer, flustered, began to search for another reply.

"No no no no no no wait wait wait wait wait. I guess that just saying companion like that sounds a bit false rather than childish coming from my mouth, doesn't it. I'd like to call you friend, but you're pretty mature and over three hundred at that, so... maybe a tea party friend, or wait, maybe associate, confidante... maybe a co-worker? Comrade... no, maybe give it a Latino twist and say amigo... combo... battery... teammate... et cetera."

He actually said et cetera aloud...

Of course, Elmer had no way to hear Czes's disbelieving thoughts and continued mumbling to himself, finally clapping his hands together.

"That's right, the expression that fits us best is 'in cahoots'..."

"Of course not. What a foolish conclusion," Czes said bitingly, cutting off Elmer before he could continue.

"But that's what Denkuro told me before. 'You and Huey are probably in cahoots'."

"It's not a positive expression... aah, no, it's all my fault for asking a serious question."

"Come now, don't be like Maiza. Act a bit more like a kid, will you?"

Czes suddenly snarled, angered by Elmer's heedless words.

"Stop that. I told you, I'm not a *brat* inside anymore."

"That so. I guess you're right. But to tell you the truth, it's a mite creepy hearing you say something like that. You're an eternal boy, in other words the only Neverlander in the world, so smile like a kid should. The sight of a kid's earnest smile makes other people happy. Though I can't say for certain that that applies to people who dislike children, hahahahaha."

"So you're saying my feelings regarding myself don't matter."

"I don't mean that! This is all for you! It's hard for an adult to laugh boldly like a kid, but you can do it, can't you? Not only that, but you can buy cheap movie tickets, go trick or treating, and get all sorts of other special treatment. And you can act like an adult only when it suits you, like you're doing right now. And like I said before, just by smiling you can make the people around you happy. Everyone will smile, and then you'll smile because of that too. Think about it, just by doing that you're filling your surroundings with happiness! Damn, I'm jealous!"

Czes frowned, unable to understand Elmer's point.

"...What in the world are you talking about? And this is something I've thought about for a long time - your obsession with smiles baffles me. Just smiling will bring people happiness? How simple can you get?"

"What's that?! A smile is one of the highest tier displays of emotion that human beings can show! Don't you know the Asian proverb, fortune comes to the merry?"

"A proverb is just a proverb. And besides, what's the basis you're using to give tiers to emotions, anyway?"

"My preference," Elmer replied promptly. Czes heaved a great, suffering sigh.

"How can someone so illogical be an alchemist?"

"Hahaha, there's no way someone who'd try to make gold out of base metals could possibly be anything close to logical."

"Aaaaah, you went and said it," Czes said, cradling his head in his hands. "You just denied your own existence."

Elmer burst out laughing and sat down next to him.

"Don't you think it's arrogant of us to call them base metals in the first place? What right do we have to forge them, smelt them, make all sorts of things out of them and then turn around and call them base?"

Elmer leaped to his feet and began to spin around Czes, as though taunting him. It was obvious that it was an utterly meaningless action, but Elmer himself seemed to be enjoying it immensely.

"Around the 15th century, alchemists found themselves divided into two factions. One side was made of people who researched everything they could, the ones who laid the foundations of modern science. The other side was made of mystics who tried to achieve the fundamental goals of alchemy. I think we're the latter. I guess if we weren't, there's no way we'd have agreed to let Maiza try and summon a demon. Though on the other hand maybe Huey and Szilard were both at the same time. What I'm trying to say is, we summoned a demon and were granted immortality. I think it's pretty silly to be logical considering what we've been through. Don't you think it's high time we lived true to our feelings? ...So let's smile, Czes."

"True to my feelings? Frankly, right now I'm so frustrated with you I'm about to burst," Czes said coldly, glaring up at Elmer with narrowed eyes.

Elmer himself noticed and stopped spinning. Unlike Czes, his own eyes were open wide.

"Eh, why?! Being frustrated on a lovely night like this isn't good for your health. It'll take years from your lifespan. Wait. Okay. I get you, roger. Stop. Don't look at me like I'm some stray dog who's decided to sniff at you. Okay, I'll listen to you seriously. I think I might have been a little excited because of all the stars in the sky."

"You never knew when to be serious... That's not what's frustrating me. What I wanted to ask you about, and what's frustrating me, is that damned calmness of yours."

"Heheh, I'll take that as a compliment."

"It's not! Not a bit of it was meant to be a compliment at all! You always mess up other people's solemnity like that. But just this once, give me a serious answer."

Elmer smiled uneasily in the face of Czes's earnest stare and sat down quietly.

"Tell me, why didn't you ask *who ate Szilard?*"

Before Elmer could open his reply, the childlike immortal continued.

"How could you welcome us so easily? We might have come to attack you! I even put my right hand on your face, no, your head! You didn't even try to shake it off! You didn't show a single sign of fear; your expression didn't even change! How?! How can you be so blind to danger? Did

you believe that you wouldn't be eaten? Did you believe so firmly that none of us had changed at all through the centuries?!"

Czes's words became uglier, as Elmer merely kept his silence.

As Czes caught his breath, Elmer just smiled sheepishly and looked him straight in the eyes.

"I forgot."

".....What?"

"No no no, well, I just now remembered there was that sort of rule. So that means that old man Szilard died like that. I forgot all about it."

"I said give me a serious answer!"

Czes's voice rose to a shout, but Elmer's smile didn't diminish at all.

"No, this isn't a joke. I'm not lying, I really forgot."

Czes finally gave up. Elmer had always been a liar, and a prankster at that, but when he said 'I'm not lying' he was always telling the truth.

In other words, if he hadn't changed, Elmer really had forgotten the conditions behind eating other immortals. Czes found it impossible to believe, and furthermore felt confused, as though his entire life up until then was being denied.

"...You're lying."

"I'm telling the truth."

"You're lying! You... you ran away because you were afraid of being eaten too, didn't you? That's why you've been hiding in a place like this!"

Czes's accusations sounded more like a desperate plea, but Elmer mercilessly shook his head.

"I didn't wander around the world to avoid Szilard or the others. And even if I hadn't forgotten the rules, I would still have welcomed you just as I did."

"You're lying."

"I'm telling you I'm not. I know you're not like that, and even if one among you had eaten Szilard, I had no intention of turning you away."

"How do you expect me to believe tha-?!"

The moment Czes surged to his feet to glare down at Elmer, Elmer grabbed his right wrist and laid the palm flat against his own forehead. If Czes thought, even for a moment, that he wanted to eat, Elmer's body and memories would surely be sucked straight into Czes's right hand.

But the one who found a cold sweat running down his back was Czes, not Elmer. He wrested his hand away from Elmer's grasp and tore it away from his forehead, his palm clammy with his own sweat. His pulse thundered in his ears and his breathing quickened in an instant.

Elmer smiled comfortingly at Czes.

"Do you believe me now?"

Czes stared blankly at that utterly fearless, completely relaxed face for a moment before regaining his calm and tearing his gaze away, muttering darkly under his breath. However, his appearance was still that of a young boy whose voice had yet to break, and so his display of discontent didn't have even half the intended effect.

"...How... How can you do something like that?" Czes asked beseechingly, looking down at Elmer with eyes full of regret and sorrow.

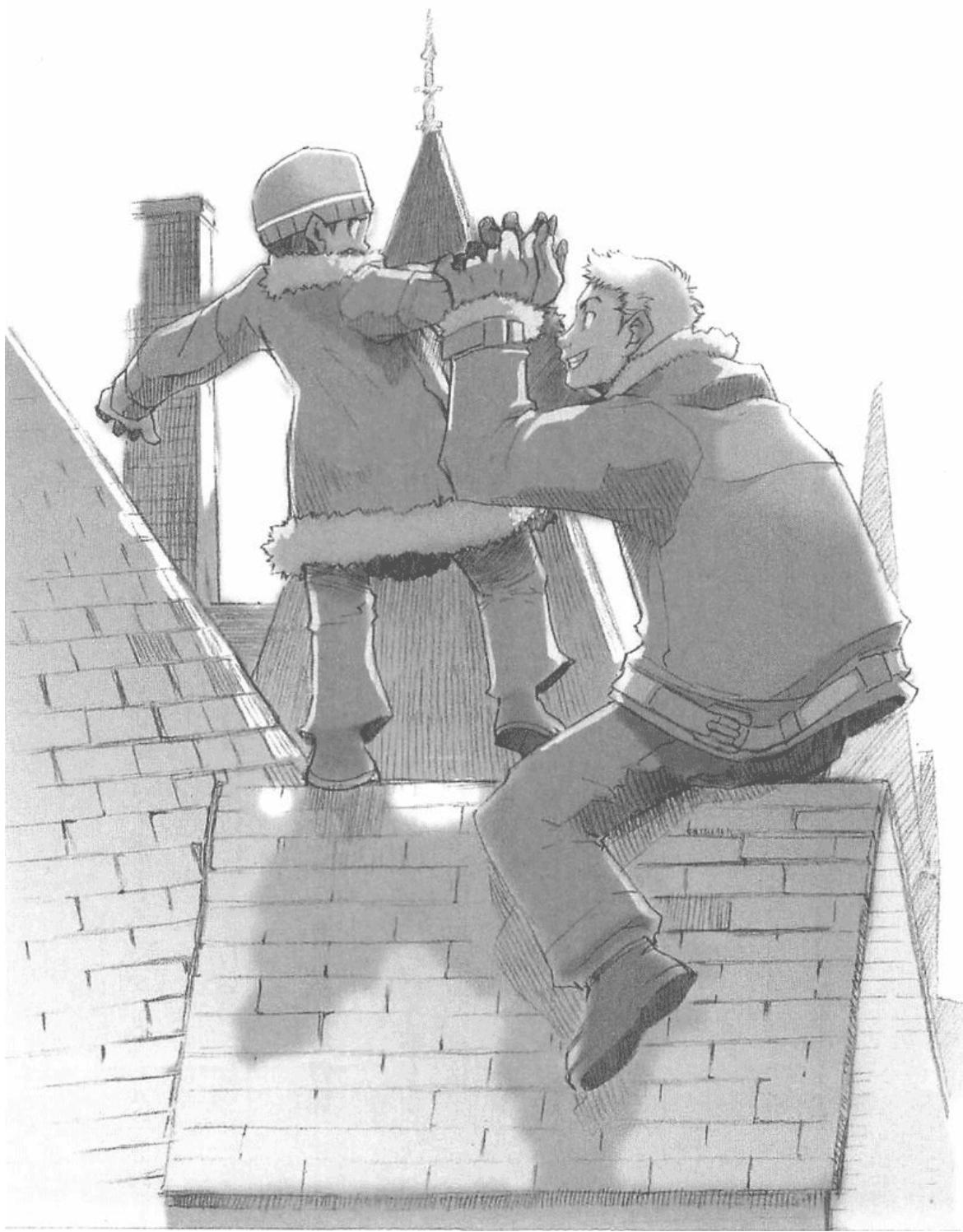
"How can you do these things... Not only you, Elmer. Maiza, Veg, Sylvie, all of them welcomed me right from the beginning without a trace of doubt. There was some trouble with Nile at first, but even he's opened up to me now. No, not just to me. All of them are completely open to each other. All of them believe that nobody's going to try and eat anyone else!"

Czes's gaze shifted to the floor and he quietly shook his head. He continued in a feeble voice as though he'd given up.

"I know that people are bound to change. Not only that, but people are fundamentally evil! I know that! But from some time ago, I'm not sure when, I started to doubt it. Decades ago, I went to New York alone. I was planning to meet Maiza again, and eat him. But on the way there I met other immortals. And not only there; when I arrived at New York there were was a whole bunch of other immortals, not the people who drank with us on the boat! Can you believe it? But that doesn't matter. What scared me most was that... *every single one of them was a good person!*"

There were other immortals besides themselves.

This came as a surprise to Elmer, but he didn't pursue the matter. It seemed that Czes was shaken even more than he let on, for it seemed that he didn't realize he'd just revealed something important.



"Isn't that a good thing?"

"Of course it's not! I told you, I know better than anyone else that human beings are fundamentally evil."

Czes hesitated for a moment, made up his mind, opened his mouth and spoke.

"...I ate Fermet."

Fermet. Elmer fell silent. Though they had never really had the chance to exchange words, if his memory served him right, Fermet had been one of his fellow alchemists on the boat, and Czes's guardian.

"Fermet tortured me endlessly, saying that they were necessary tests. Still, I believed him. But he kept hurting me even more!"

The unexpected confession left Elmer at a loss for words. The Fermet in his memory was not a man who would have done such things to Czes, who had been like a little brother or a son to him.

"But you know what? I believed in him, I believed in him even after all he'd done to me, and then one day he tried to eat me! I struggled for my life and suddenly found myself with my right hand on his head... Can you imagine the hell that opened up for me then? What I felt then when I realized that the person I'd trusted so much was actually full of monstrous malice inside, and the agony that came from having to hold him inside myself! That's why I hated the world. I decided that the entire world, myself included, was just a thing of evil. But why, why are they all so good to me! I feel like I'm the only bad person on earth. You and Maiza and Isaac and Miria and Firo and Ennis and, how, why, you're all... you're all..."

Czes bowed his head, the words refusing to come forth any more.

Elmer was silent for a long moment, then suddenly looked up at the sky and said something quietly, as though talking to himself.

"I envy you."

Czes slowly raised his head.

"I really do. Look, Czes. Whether humans are good or evil, think of it like this. Say that out of the six billion human beings living in the world, 99.9 percent of them are evil. That means that ever since you got on that train, you've had the good luck to meet people from the remaining 0.1 percent, one after another! What are the chances of that? It's like the lottery number being the same twice in a row, and you have both of the winning tickets! An asteroid collided with the earth and a bunch of chimpanzees wrote the entire works of Shakespeare!"

The rapid stream of words coming from Elmer's mouth made Czes feel even more ridiculous. The fact that he knew that Elmer wasn't just comforting him with empty words but expressing his honest opinion made it all the more painful.

"...I envy that optimism of yours."

"Optimistic or not, I'm only telling the truth. And while we're at it, I want to make it clear that you're a right fine fellow yourself, so relax and live it up a little, Czes."

"I don't need to be consoled. I'm just angry. Nobody else has changed one bit, but I'm becoming worse and worse. I'm the only one who's changed. That makes me so mad I can't stand it."

Perhaps having nothing more to say, Czes turned and headed toward the handholds that led down from the roof. Just as he was preparing to head down, Elmer spoke to his back.

"You're a strange one. If you can worry so much about being a bad person... then you can just become a good one."

"It's not that simple."

"Czes, you just grew up, that's all. You didn't change. You just came to see both the good and bad parts of this world. That's a good thing. And if you still think that you've changed so much... then you can change again. Just like how water that freezes can melt again, people can as much as they want."

Elmer scratched his head sheepishly and laughed.

"If you want to melt again, you just need to feel the warmth around you. Even if you can't bring yourself to accept that kindness, the least you could do is acknowledge it, don't you think?"

"I don't know how you can say that with a straight face. What does it matter to you whether I change or not?"

"I told you already. You look better when you're smiling like a kid. Not just you. The vast majority of people on the planet are born to look better when smiling. So if you want to smile, I'll help you any way I can. Ah, though I'll ask you not to ask me to kill anyone, or die myself."

Czes stopped and looked back, his face carefully blank.

"Then if I told you to jump off the roof right now, would you? That wouldn't kill you."

Elmer didn't reply.

"You shouldn't make promises like that so light-"

Czes wasn't able to finish.

"All right, got it. Hup."

"Huh?"

With a preposterously half-hearted cry, Elmer disappeared from Czes's sight.

By the time Czes realized what had happened, a dull crunch echoed from the ground below.

A moment later, a commotion as Maiza and the others came out to see what it was.

"Elmer? Elmer, wake up!"

"What? What are you doing dead here?"

"Hmm, most fortunate. We should tie him up before he comes back to life..."

Czes stared up at the starry sky, listening to the noises below. An unreadable expression passed over the boy's features as he muttered quietly to himself.

"I'm sorry, Elmer... I appreciate the effort, but the smile just won't come..."



CHAPTER 3
KIDOAIRAKU: JOY
Sylvie Lumiere

The next day
Christmas Eve

A long table stood in the center of the largest room in the old castle, the dining hall, currently the five immortals' gathering place. Instead of food, five glasses of water had been placed in a line along the table. Though there was no food, various Christmas decorations were hung on the walls, and the candle set up on the tabletop cast enchanting light over the room.

"Meeeeeeeerrrry Chriiiistmaaas!"

Congratulations rang through the halls, the queer intonation perhaps due to overexcitement.

The man who had said it was currently tied up hand and foot in a chair at the head of the table, while Maiza and the rest were seated around him. Captured in the middle of the night, the castle's master had spent the rest of the night bound to his seat. But even then, he immediately began to give orders the moment he woke up, transforming the inside of the castle into the image of Christmas cheer.

They wondered to themselves why they had to do such things, but once the girls living in the castle all wordlessly set to work, they had no choice but to roll up their sleeves and help as well.

"Merry Christmas, my ass," Sylvie grumbled tiredly with a snort. "I can't believe you actually jumped off the roof once Czes found you... Don't you think that's a bit stupid, even considering you're immortal?"

"There's no such thing degrees of stupidity! You could say that all things that have exceeded their limits are too-"

"I say this: I don't want to hear it."

"Oh, come now!"

While Elmer bickered good-naturedly with his companions, Czes kept his silence. In the end, Elmer hadn't revealed the details of his conversation with Czes to the others, and glossed over it by saying that he'd made the decision to jump off by himself. It seemed to Czes that Elmer was covering up for his sins, and he even considered revealing what had happened to the others, but while he sat frozen with indecision, the situation had advanced without him.

"No matter what led to you falling from the roof, it's fine as long as you and Czes know what happened."

Maiza seemed to have noticed that something had happened between the two, but he seemed disinclined to interfere. Come to think of it, Sylvie and Nile, too, did not deign to ask what had happened on the rooftop.

Perhaps all of them already understood, and they were just protecting him by pretending not to notice.

...But that's meddling with my business even more than anything else.

But Czes himself was none too eager to make sure, and so he kept his mouth shut. Quietly, he remembered what had happened in the dead of night. All that he could think of was the image of his own right hand on Elmer's head.

...Could I trust someone else that much?

The question popped up suddenly in his mind, and Czes could only shake his head. If it were Maiza... or his new friends in New York, Isaac and Miria, or the woman who'd taken him in and acted as his big sister, Ennis, then he wouldn't mind if they placed their hands on his head. But as for willingly offering his head, of his own will at that... that, he couldn't say.

So, taking that into consideration, how could Elmer have acted as he did, to a person he'd met for the first time in nearly three centuries? Czes had wrestled with this matter all night. It would be easy to simply decide that Elmer was a simpleton, but the air around him was different from other people. For example, Isaac and Miria - the foolish couple living in New York - would no doubt smile and thrust forth their heads if he asked, believing in him without a second thought.

But the man known as Elmer was infinitely *calculating*. He wanted to make people smile, not from natural impulse, but with a firm, scheming objective in mind. Those schemes might be quite faulty, but nonetheless Czes was absolutely mystified.

What had made him that way, what had prevented Czes from even thinking of eating Elmer?

And as he struggled with such questions, suddenly Elmer struck up a conversation with him.

"Don't look so down, Czes. Now, I say, is the time for smiles to rule the world. In other words, uh, the frowners are going to die. Think of a cartoon demon king who takes over the world. He's grinning from ear to ear, right? He's not smiling because he took over the world, the bloke took over the world *because* he was smiling. So what we've got to do right now is smile before he does, and give food to the starving people of the world so that they can smile too..."

...Perhaps it would be best not to understand him.

While Czes despaired, Nile swung around arrogantly and cut to the chase.

"This isn't the time to go on another one of your rants, Elmer. Come to think of it, you're the demon king to these villagers anyway. I say this: you must keep your promise. Now, speak."

"Nile's right, Elmer. When we asked one of the girls yesterday, she said that she'd been kidnapped away from the village as a living sacrifice. They didn't deign to elaborate, but... just what is going on? It doesn't seem like you've used violence, but depending on your answer the consequences may become quite severe."

For once, the laughter was gone from Maiza's features, but Elmer merely smiled in the face of that forceful stare.

"Kidnapping, eh? That's got a bad ring to it, don't you think? All that happened is that the villagers offered them up when I asked for living sacrifices."

"That's the same thing."

"No it's not. You see..."

Elmer shook his head as though to say it was a long story, and with a sigh began to elaborate on what had happened.

The tale of how a demon had come to be in the village.

"Now then, where shall I start... Right. It all began when I was murdered in the village."

December, three years ago

When Elmer found the village, a young girl stood before him.

Her mannerisms, humble to the point of servility, aroused his curiosity, but he put that aside and decided to let her show him around.

The villagers did not show themselves before him, and the houses all stood silent, their doors firmly locked. Only the many eyes from the shadowed windows stayed persistently fixed on him.

"Oh dear, my, my my my. I can feel the hungry stares of wild animals all focused on my back. This is awkward. Is this what they mean when they say it's hard being popular? Or maybe aliens are planning to abduct me... I say, do you think being popular with aliens would mean I'm universally attractive?"

Guided by the girl, Elmer made his way, rambling, to a hut that stood alone on the outskirts of the village.

"Wow, is this it? Really?"

It was an ancient cabin that could not be called good in any sense of the word. It looked as though another proper snowfall would send it crashing down. One of the doors had fallen off completely, and that paired with the broken windows made it doubtful whether it could even stave off the cold at all.

"...I guess it makes sense. Doesn't look like anyone's living here. No, sorry if I sounded ungrateful. You went to the trouble of helping me out, after all. And I did say that all I wanted was somewhere to find shelter from the wind and rain. Right, I think I'll stay here, as a sign of respect for your efforts. I'll pay you back tomorrow by telling you all about Christmas, so just you wait."

So said, Elmer tried to part ways with the girl, but for some reason she followed him inside.

"Hmm? Ah, I'm fine. I'll manage by myself, so you can go home," Elmer said, smiling, but the girl's face was clouded with uncertainty as she replied.

"This... is my house..."

"Hmm?"

Grin still fixed firmly on his face, he looked around once more at the darkened interior.

And slowly, the smile slipped off his features.

Inside the hovel, which could not by any stretch of the imagination be called fit for human occupation, a handful of girls sat staring at him.

All of them were dressed shoddily, and as one they were completely expressionless. They all looked very similar, like sisters.

As Elmer stood still, dumbfounded, one of the girls - the one who had guided him to the shack - carefully opened her mouth.

"I think... one more person will be manageable, somehow... if it is too crowded I will sleep outside..."

Now

"No, you see, I was absolutely gobsmacked. If it had been a gaggle of beautiful women I would've been overjoyed at discovering such a harem, but come now, you don't expect me to lay a hand on girls who don't look a shade over fifteen at the oldest, do you? Well, no, I hear that that sort of thing's right popular in Japanese comic books, but it's a bit of a shock stumbling on the real thing."

Still strapped to his chair, Elmer rambled on and on about his past. It was hard to believe, but Maiza and the others had seen the girls who looked so alike themselves, so they decided to listen on.

"So what did you do then?"

"Right. I thought to myself that they had to be sisters who had lost their parents, or maybe they were being bullied by the village youths, so I kept my mouth shut instead of asking about it. I walked around the village the next day but none of the townspeople showed themselves to me. I knew they were looking at me from afar, but when I went to try and talk to them they all ran away. So I just decided to ignore them and look for a better place for the girls to live. And that's how I found this old castle. I hear the villagers won't come here because they think there's a monster, but I looked around and found nothing. So I cleaned this place up and now we're all living here together."

"I can understand that much. But why have you been branded as a monster yourself?"

Elmer grinned cheekily.

"I just wanted to decorate this place a little for Christmas since it was a genuine castle in the snow, you know? The girls helped me out and we managed to decorate the entire place in one night. We didn't have any colored paper or anything, so we had to use sticks and stones, but... Well, anyway, on the next day the villagers all came rushing to the castle on the next day - Christmas. I thought to myself that they'd finally decided to contact me. In fact I was expecting to have a nice little Christmas party to get friendly with all of them, but they were all holding weapons! Wanted me to leave the village immediately, at that! I tried to protect the girls but I found myself completely outnumbered, faced with dozens of hoes and sickles. What a desperate situation! ...What do you say? Are you on the edge of your seats yet?"

"...Please tell me you aren't making this up."

"Don't look at me like I'm some sort of habitual liar. No, no, I'm telling the truth, honest... Well, anyway, long story short I ended up dying once."

Sylvie's eyes widened.

"What... how?"

"I complained a little and then suddenly that mayor chap, Dez, decided to give me a right big whack on the head. And not only that..."

"...They saw you regenerate," Maiza finished for him, quietly.

He must have been right, for Elmer looked away as he continued.

"When I came to, there was a wooden stake stuck in my heart. You have no idea how much it hurt. Honestly, I found myself feeling a bit sorry for vampires then."

"I understand. Heart wounds hurt like nothing else," Czes said suddenly, remembering something, then shivered as though he'd suddenly been dunked in cold water.

"Well... once I got the stake out, I was fine again in no time, and... since in the end nobody had died, I decided to clear up any misunderstandings that might've come up and headed back to the village."

"What?"

"Those villagers looked scared out of their wits. I can't begin to tell you how funny it was. This woman selling fruit in the center road fainted dead away the moment she laid eyes on me... In the end the villagers surrounded me again and this time burned me alive. I ran away with my last breath, still on fire, and managed to throw myself off a snowy hill and put out the flames, but my body wouldn't stop rolling and I ended up buried in the snow. Ah, still, the snow ended up hiding me so I guess things worked out."

Stupified silence.

"The sun came up again and shone down on me. When the snow melted away and I came to, I realized my lower body was completely frozen! It took me a solid day to get back to the castle, but since in the end nobody had died, I decided to clear up any misunderstandings that might've come up and headed back to the village on the next day."

"Huh?" Sylvie interrupted suddenly, looking like she wanted to ask him something. But Elmer ignored her and kept talking.

"Those villagers looked scared out of their wits. I can't begin to tell you how funny it was. This woman selling fruit in the center road shrieked and ran away... In the end the villagers surrounded me again and tied me up and threw me into the river. Aah... I finally dredged up on the riverbank and walked through the forest, back to the village. Since in the end nobody had died, I decided to clear up any misunderstandings that might've come up and-"

Perhaps sensing the atmosphere around him, Elmer coughed discretely and skipped ahead.

"Anyway, I kept doing that, day after day."

"I say this: you are a fool."

"Don't take the piss out of me like that, Nile. I just thought that if I showed up time and time again with a smiling face, no matter how many times they killed me, eventually they'd figure out that I meant them no harm."

"If it were me, I would have left immediately."

Nile stated the obvious, but Elmer quietly shook his head.

"I hadn't reached my objective, you see... Mmm, I guess I'll explain that later. Either way, I was planning to stay the course... but then I saw that the girl who'd shown me to her home that first day had a bad cut on her face... When I asked her about it, she told me that the mayor'd hit her. Well, then that really got me riled up... so I decided to play a few pranks on the villagers. When I showed them a little tricks I'd learned back when I was scamming people with alchemy, they started to treat me completely differently, like a demon king or something."

Sylvie had been quiet up till then, and now she finally opened her mouth.

"Yeah... The people of this village aren't normal, either. You didn't do a thing to hurt them, but still they insist on seeing you as an enemy..."

"It's nothing out of the ordinary. They say that Europe back during the witch hunts was even worse. It's true that there were inquisitors who'd do anything for money and others who made up witches just to get their jollies from the pain of others, but the general public's mob mentality was just as bad."

Elmer laughed aloud, though the subject of his rambling wasn't funny in the least.

"You chaps don't understand just how scary *normal people* can be. You simply can't see the terror that any Joe Bloggs off the street can cause."

Elmer's grin widened even more as he remembered the things he'd gone through.

"Human beings become savage when they're conquered by their own greed. But most of them can control themselves. Those are what we normal people. But what do you think can cause that savage reaction in normal people, even more than greed? I'll tell you the answer. It's fear."

"Hmm, I can't say I comprehend completely, but I do understand."

The masked man nodded, and Elmer quietly nodded back.

"People use their own fear as an excuse to exercise their power. To protect themselves. It's something that's allowed to anyone in a mob of terrified people. Though I must say, being on the receiving side is quite vexing, hahaha."

Elmer took a moment to catch his breath, then continued the story on a different vein.

"So let's change the subject. I told the villagers to bring me a live sacrifice every year. It was a joke, of course, but they must've taken it seriously, because they really did send me a girl. I was forced to ask for enough food to feed her. I thought it was a fair enough demand, considering how much the villagers had abused her."

"...The food is one thing, but there's still a problem. We'll ignore the matter of your pranking for now as well. All we want to know is the nature of those girls-

Just as Maiza was poised to strike the heart of the matter, Elmer's body gave out a series of popping noises.

As the rest of them stared, eyes wide...

"Speaking of pranks, I showed them something like this, wahahahahaha!"

Smoke suddenly billowed forth from Elmer's body.

He threw himself backwards and disappeared into the smokescreen, still laughing. Nile hurriedly grabbed hold of the chair, but all that was left were some loosened ropes and a gas canister.

"Was that sound just now..."

"Mmm, it seems he dislocated his own joints. Mmm... what an unpredictable man."

Elmer's voice came from the ceiling, as though jeering at the four of them.

"Don't worry! Even if you can't catch me... February! Everything will be revealed come February, so..."

Morning, December 26th, 2001

The old castle

The sky was clear and startlingly blue, and the air was bitingly cold.

The castle hadn't looked that big from the outside, but once she was inside Sylvie soon came to realize that it was quite large. She held a New Year's ornament in her hand as she looked around and sighed heavily.

"What's going to happen in February, anyway?"

That meant she had to spend the next thirty-five days in this castle. It was harsh punishment for a woman who'd always enjoyed the fruits of civilization.

How many years had it been since she'd been in a place with no shower, no TV, not even a magazine or two?

Now that she gave it some thought, strange thing after strange thing had happened ever since they'd made their way into this forest. An isolated village. Girls mounted on horses. A bizarrely constructed castle. An old companion who was now ruling as a demon. And villagers who feared him more than was natural.

Compared to just a year ago, when she'd celebrated the end of the 21st century's first year, this village seemed more like a fantasy world that one would find in a book or movie.

"Honestly... it feels like this place is stuck in time a century ago... no, even farther back than that," Sylvie muttered to herself, staring once more at the ornament in her hand.

The decorations Elmer had prepared were exquisitely crafted, recreating the ornaments of New Year's celebrations from all over the world. They had mounted them where the girls told them to; the girls passed on Elmer's demands as though they were constantly in contact with him.

But the girls didn't seem inclined to talk about themselves. The first night they'd arrived, Maiza had told them that they could go back to the village if they wanted, and he'd explain the situation to Elmer, but the girls had merely shaken their heads.

Come to think of it, we don't even know their names.

Upon realizing that she didn't even know the names of the girls she'd been living with for the past month, Sylvie resolved to get closer to them. She wanted to talk to them immediately, but such an opportunity didn't show itself.

Just as she was about greet noon alone, gripped by a strange sense of loss, an unexpected chance presented itself.

"Umm... Master Elmer says that if boiled river water will suffice, he can prepare a bath for you..."

Someone suddenly spoke to Sylvie as she stood at the door, inspecting a Japanese kadomatsu decoration. She turned around to see one of the "sacrificed" girls standing in the light from an open window, glancing timidly about.

"Tell him to come and say it himself."

"Ah, yes, my apologies..."

"What're you saying sorry for? And you don't have to call someone like Elmer 'Master'. That goes for other people, too."

Sylvie gave her a warm smile and walked up to her, stooping and bringing herself to the girl's eye level. Tilting her head slightly to one side, she said, "I'm Sylvie. Sylvie Lumiere. If it's okay with you, could you tell me your name?"

The girl seemed slightly surprised, but perhaps Sylvie's smile calmed her, for at length she hesitantly opened her mouth.

"I... My name is Phil..."

"Really? Thank you, Phil! You don't have to talk so politely to me, you know. Just call me Sylvie."

Suddenly, Sylvie realized something. She should have noticed it the moment she met Phil, but she'd been too distracted by the entire town's strange atmosphere to see it.

"You... can speak English?"

"Y-yes. Master Elmer said a while ago that I might need to know it..."

Sylvie listened carefully. While Phil's inflection was a bit peculiar, she had no problem understanding the girl. Elmer had definitely taught them with some sort of goal in mind.

"He isn't trying to spirit them away from this place, is he?"

But even as she said it, she realized that if what Elmer had said before was true, there was a good chance that these girls had been abused in the village. In that case, taking them away wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

"I guess it's up to you girls to decide."

"Excuse me?"

"Ah, mm, it's nothing. I was just talking to myself."

Sylvie quietly cocked her head to one side and looked at Phil.

Phil avoided her gaze, unsure of where to look... and soon enough she mumbled, "Excuse me," and tried to leave. But Sylvie walked along with her, matching Phil's pace.

"Umm... What..."

"This is a connection, isn't it? I want to know a little more about you. What do you say we go for a little walk inside the courtyard?"

The girl stopped walking and stood stock still, silent. It seemed a slightly unnatural lack of motion for simple indecision, but soon enough she raised her head and looked up at Sylvie expressionlessly.

"Very well. *I have just received permission from Master Elmer.*"

...Just?

Unable to understand the meaning of what Phil had said, Sylvie was momentarily flustered, but she decided that the girl had probably made a grammatical mistake because of her incomplete grasp of the language and put it out of her mind.

Little did she know that that strange statement had in fact revealed Phil's true nature...

A few hours ago
The mayor's home

"I'll be back soon, father," the mayor's son said. The sun was just beginning to peek out from the village's south side.

"Do what you will," Dez replied gruffly. Laid out before him on the table were the still uncleared remains of breakfast, and a glass filled with water.

A few others were also in the mayor's house, the village's important figures who had been at the meeting before. They were *called* important, but they didn't really have any special positions; all that was different was that their opinions were given a tad more weight than normal.

Unlike the mayor, these men looked after Felt with worried eyes as he strode toward the door. As he grasped the doorknob, one man who looked to be the eldest among them suddenly spoke.

"Are you really determined to go?"

"They'll only be on their guard if we all move together. And we just want to see what they're doing, so it'll be better if I go to scout alone."

"Even then, you're the mayor's son. You shouldn't have to do this."

"If not me, then who? Nobody else would go willingly. And since I'm the mayor's son, if I'm discovered I can at least attempt to negotiate."

"Yes, it's true that you're braver than us..."

"Let him leave," Dez suddenly said from his place at the table, dismissing the townspeople's worries.

"There's no need to say that!"

"The whole reason your son is going in the first place is because you can't do a thing--"

All the people in the room raised their voices in protest, but the mayor's response was cold and terse.

"Then why don't you go in his stead?"

"Uhh..."

"That's enough, father..." Felt said, and walked out of the house and into the cold.

The villagers followed him out, muttering to themselves and throwing sidelong glances at Dez as they left.

"Such a good young man..."

"He's become a different man ever since his wife died..."

"Can't even clear his own dishes without his son..."

"I pity young Felt..."

Dez threw back the glass of water and snorted to himself, ignoring the villagers' snide comments.

"Hmph."

Confirming that he was alone, Dez allowed himself a sly smirk. He looked up at the ceiling, his gaze unfocused, and smirked.

His expression, *his smile that was as utterly cold and devoid of humor*, would have made any observer freeze with fear or recoil with revulsion.

Any observer, that is, with the exception of one smile junkie, the man the villagers feared as a demon.

Morning.

Today will be an extremely busy day.

I expected as much.

I must take down the Christmas decorations, and start preparations for the celebration of the new year.

But today is different. There are people.

People from "outside" this forest. I think they are Master Elmer's old friends.

They treat me kindly. At first, that in itself was painful.

But now things are a little different. Because I have decided to hope that maybe I will be able to leave together with them.

I will probably be betrayed by this wish. But at least I can hold this dream close until that time.

I am used to pain. Even if they leave this forest, it will merely be a return to normalcy. The first days, the unchanging days. The days I lived bereft of dreams and hope, bogged down in a quagmire of forgetfulness until I lost, little by little, even the ability to think...

I stop my pondering, my mood becoming foul.

I decide to concentrate entirely on preparing for the new year.

These kadomatsu decorations are ones we used last year as well... it seems that they are normally supposed to be made with plants called "bamboo" and "pine," but such plants do not grow in this country. Master Elmer said that one day he would show me the real thing, but that is probably impossible.

The oldest memory in my mind comes back to life.

A place that is not here - most likely a place near where I was "born again" over and over.

In a room with walls and a floor made of something that is neither stone nor wood - the man strokes my head and speaks.

...That forest is *your bottle and your flask*. You are beings who cannot live outside...

Aaah, now I can finally, painfully realize what he meant.

No matter how much I dream, how much I wish, in the end we...

"Hey."

A sudden voice makes itself known to me, and I turn around.

Master Felt is standing before me, *in front of the hut at the edge of the village*.

"Ah..."

"I'm going to head to the castle now."

Master Felt says his piece and looks into my eyes, expressionless.

"What should I do? To you, that demon's companions are-"

He stops suddenly and looks down.

"Sorry, it's nothing."

Perhaps Master Felt has noticed I am perplexed, for he hides his face with his hands and looks away as he speaks.

"It's okay. I might have said what I said the day before yesterday, but... I'll make sure you won't have to become a living sacrifice."

"Ah..."

I become more puzzled than ever. What is this man talking about?

"We've lowered our tails and did as the demon asked so far, but I tell you, we're going to force him out of this forest before February - before you have to be offered as a sacrifice. And then, well... I couldn't do anything up to now because of my father, but once we get rid of that demon I think I'll be able to muster my courage. I'll do my best so that the villagers won't torment you anymore."

Master Felt nods, his eyes filled with conviction. I am at a loss for what to do.

By demon, he must mean Master Elmer and his friends. Forcing them to leave would lead to the instant destruction of my wish. But the words Master Felt just uttered are more than enough to replace that dream.

"See you again," says Master Felt as he leaves.

...What should I do? Should I just wait for the outcome, swept up by the things around me? Or should I make a move? If I do, what should I try to do?

Ah, hesitation eats away at my mind. If only, if only, just now... if Master Felt had smiled, just a little, if he had but given me a selfless smile like Master Elmer, then perhaps I might have been able to find some small amount of hope in this village.

Using such useless thoughts as an excuse, I find myself once again choosing to let myself be caught up in this current.

But in truth... I want to smile, too.

Right now, I cannot smile sincerely. I cannot even force a fake one, for that would feel like betraying Master Elmer. I cannot even fool myself.

Once again I stop thinking... and concentrate solely on taking care of the kadomatsu decorations at the castle's entrance.

Noon
The castle garden

Sylvie and Phil walked through the garden, enjoying themselves underneath the clear blue sky. The sunlight was blindingly bright, but it was still winter, and as though to prove it their breath steamed white in the cold air.

The garden was decently kept, perhaps thanks to Elmer, and there was a sort of messily, haphazard road leading from the main gate to the inside of the castle.

Sylvie asked Phil many questions as they walked. She wanted to learn a little more, anything at all about her - and Elmer's goals - but all of her efforts ended in failure. It seemed Phil wasn't inclined to talk about herself at all, replying to any and all questions with either an awkward expression and a bowed head, or a short, "My apologies, I do not know." It felt more like she was genuinely unaware of who she was, rather than like she didn't want to answer.

She didn't want it to feel like she was interrogating the girl, so Sylvie attempted to make small talk with Phil as well, but Phil refused to take the lead in the conversation.

Throughout the entire talk, Phil said only one thing, near the end of their walk, that stayed on Sylvie's mind.

It was when Sylvie brought up the other girls living in the castle.

"That's right. The other girls... they all looked a lot like you. Are you sisters?"

Sylvie only mentioned it in passing, but upon hearing the question, Phil suddenly looked more unsure of herself than she had all day. She paused as though thinking over what to say, and then quietly opened her mouth.

"Um... I am not sure, but... *I am the only one living in this castle.*"

"What?"

What could she have meant? Confused, Sylvie started to pursue the matter... but was suddenly brought to a halt.

There was a small shadow moving about in the corner of the garden.

But instead of looking at it, Sylvie gave the girl a smile like always and murmured in her ear.

"Phil, the wind's starting to get stronger. What do you say we head inside?"

"Yes."

Phil obediently agreed, perhaps having not noticed the shadow.

The two headed back into the castle without a second glance at the garden.

Leaving the shadow behind in the cold wind.

"Hmm, to think there'd be an entrance to an underground tunnel here."

"It seems to be some sort of escape route. I didn't expect such a thing to be in this castle."

Nile and Maiza had searched the castle thoroughly, and discovered a set of stairs in what seemed to be the castle's study. It could hardly be called a study, actually - it was a small room filled with bookshelves, but the books themselves had nearly all rotted away. Thanks to that, though, they'd easily been able to discover the device that moved the shelves.

"Let's go down."

"Just a moment. First, let's see what kind of books are here."

Maiza held Nile back and reached for the few remaining writings that were left. These books, too, were nearly eroded away from age, but they managed to make out the letters on the pages... and looked at each other.

"...These are quite familiar."

"I say this: I agree."

It seemed that the book Maiza had picked just happened to be... no, that wasn't it. He looked around at the writing on the books around them, and gave his certain opinion.

"The majority of the books here... are written on the subject of alchemy. In particular..."

Upon hearing Maiza's conclusion, Nile's eyes, hidden in the depths of his mask, shined quietly.

...I've been seen.

Felt held his breath from his place in the garden's shadows, his palms slick with sweat.

He had been able to slip unnoticed into the garden because the main gate had been flung wide open, but directly afterward one of the girls who was supposed to have been given up as a sacrifice had walked out into the garden together with the outsider woman who had come to the village not too long ago.

He hid behind a tree next to the gate's pillar, but the two slowly approached him, absorbed in some sort of conversation. Felt decided that if he stayed where he was he'd discovered, and used the brief window of time when the two were looking in another direction to dart behind another tree in the corner of the garden.

But when he poked out his head to see what was going on, the two had stopped walking, and after talking a bit more they turned and went back into the castle.

Perhaps they had noticed him and were going to call their companions.

Anxious, Felt stopped dead in his tracks and decided to wait and see.

"Say... this place has become fancier than it was last year..." he muttered to himself, examining the castle from his place in the shadows.

Strange ornaments were festooned on every window, colored overwhelmingly in shades of red and white. The colors failed utterly at blending in with the stone masonry, and that incongruity made the castle look even more ridiculous. But to the villagers, that oddity would seem more terrifying than anything.

Two sculptures made from the trees of the forest stood at the entrance. Two sticks had been cut at an angle and stuck into the ground, and a material made of conifer leaves had been tied to the bottoms. It seemed like a weapon, perhaps a trap, or maybe even some sort of shamanistic totem, and the sight of it filled Felt's heart with strange anxiety.

He swallowed dryly, the tension in his body at its peak.

"Hey."

A sudden voice. A cold electric shock ran down the boy's spine.

The sweat on his palms dried in an instant, and he found himself unable to even turn around; his breathing itself suddenly felt like it was outside the passage of normal time.

His consciousness rocked violently, as though he would explode at any moment, but his body refused to follow his commands. Perhaps the sudden shock to his mind had severed its link to his body.

From behind the paralyzed Felt came a voice that was more than sufficient to put his worries to rest. The clear tones wrapped warmly around his back.

"Aren't you cold standing there? Why don't you come inside and have some tea?"

Felt finally gathered his wits and slowly looked back.

Behind him stood the mysteriously beautiful woman who had surely just gone inside, and on her face was a gentle, cheerful smile.

The castle's drawing room.

The fireplace's crimson light shone faintly on Felt's surprised face.

Across the table from where he sat were Sylvie and Czes. They had tried to call Nile and Maiza as well, but they'd been unable to find them no matter how much they searched. They'd considered looking a bit more, but then decided that Felt would only feel pressured when surrounded by four people, and so only Sylvie and Czes were there to hear the boy's story.

"Mmm, where should I start? I'm Sylvie, and this is Czes. Nice to meet you."

"Ah, ahh... well, uhh, I'm named Felt Nibil."

Even caught flat-footed as he was, Felt decided to tell the truth and give his name. He had feared that in the worst case, he would utterly fail at negotiating and be captured as a prisoner, but never in his wildest dreams had he imagined that they would invite him to the drawing room and introduce themselves amicably.

"Have you come to scout us out?"

The boy sitting next to Sylvie laughed scornfully at him. Caught red-handed, Felt could only bow his head, unable to make any objection.

"Now, now, Czes. He's our guest, you can't talk to him like that!"

"But."

"Oh, you. Don't give me that look. It doesn't suit your cute face at all!"

Sylvie laughed merrily as Czes made a strangled noise and shut his mouth, his face flushing bright red. However, they were talking in English, and Felt could not understand.

"Sorry, don't worry about it. Aah, that's right. The only one among us who can't understand your language is Nile, the masked man, so you can say whatever you want to us."

Though Sylvie spoke reassuringly, Felt found himself at an utter loss for what to say. He couldn't just up and tell them to leave the village, and the atmosphere was in no way proper for him to bring up the subject of the sacrificed girls. More than anything, negotiations were impossible as long as the demon Elmer wasn't present.

Just then, another thought came to the forefront of Felt's mind. Perhaps these two were monsters as well, just like Elmer.

The curiosity grew and grew, and at length Felt raised his voice in an attempt to grab the lead of the conversation.

"Uh... Just what sort of relation do you have... to the one called Elmer?"

It was quite a roundabout question, but Sylvie soon realized what he meant and smiled mischievously as she told him the truth.

"Both this child and I are basically the same as Elmer. I guess you could say that we're immortals who heal almost instantly from any wound... more or less?"

Stunned by such a casual admission, Felt reeled with shock. It was the outcome he had feared most, but Sylvie's voice was so pleasant that he found it hard to realize it for the problem it was.

"Immortal... then that means you are also... evil creatures?"

Felt suppressed his mounting agitation and just barely managed to force the question from his lips. Sylvie, on the other hand, replied just as easily as before.

"We're not evil. We're purely human, not demons. Though I suppose we did get some help from something that called itself a demon. Oh, that's right. Now that we're friends, how about we tell you more about that?"

"Wait, can we afford to reveal something like this?"

Surprised, Czes tried to hold her back, but Sylvie merely smiled and nodded.

"It's fine, it's fine. We've got nothing to lose from telling him, and it's up to him to decide whether or not to believe us. Ah, but then again, if he can believe in 'evil creatures' then I suppose that this story shouldn't be so hard to swallow."

As though those words had made Felt remember something, his eyes widened and he suddenly found his voice again.

"Right... What about the 'monster' in this castle... What happened to the monster that was supposed to be here before Elmer came?"

Sylvie and Czes could only look at each other, bewildered, at Felt's clear question.

"Monster?"

"Huh? You... you don't know? They said it's been living in this castle for decades."

"A monster? Elmer didn't say a thing about that... He didn't even mention anything remotely like it."

Felt silently stared into Sylvie's eyes for a long moment, then heaved a great sigh of relief.

"I see... it must have been only a rumor..."

The latter part he said quietly as though talking to himself, and he bowed his head, the tension draining from his body.

"I'm sorry I worried you with such strange questions. Uhh... I'm actually a little curious about who you are..."

Felt put a little more oomph in his voice and tried to change the subject. The fear and anxiety that had been in his voice just a moment ago had vanished. Perhaps relieved herself, Sylvie smiled softly and began to lay out their story to the village youth.

"I see. Where should I start. It all started three hundred years ago..."

The past that flowed forth from Sylvie's lips came vividly to life in the minds of the two boys. Felt, who had never seen the outside world, couldn't imagine it clearly, but to Czes, the memories came back as nostalgic sights and sounds.

The scenes that unfolded endlessly before him were infinitely beautiful, and at the same time infinitely sad.

"I say this: I can't see a thing."

"There's no need to say it. Here, I'll turn on a light..."

Nile and Maiza had descended underground through the stairway in the study, and naturally there were no lights in the tunnel. Maiza lifted the light he'd brought from the car to search the castle and cautiously raised it up, flashing it around.

The tunnel led straight away from the entrance, and about ten meters from where they stood the stone walls petered off, melting away into a passage made of tightly packed dirt.

The two looked carefully at each other, and slowly advanced down the tunnel. They summarized what they knew of the village as they walked down the cold, drafty shaft.

"Blast, just what kind of forest is this place? An isolated town, a strange castle, girls meant for sacrifice, and all of those books... Are you sure this is just someone's private property?"

"Yes. Officially, this place is owned by a rich citizen of this country... I was unable to contact the owner ahead of time, as I already told Sylvie and Czes. It seems that he inherited this land from an ancestor, but he doesn't seem to be doing any business as of now."

"A rich brat living off the bounty of his forefathers, then. With this much land, the family could probably live easy for at least three more generations... though the fourth would fall upon hard times."

As Nile calmly made his predictions regarding the lives of other people, Maiza too spoke seriously, remembering the atmosphere of the village.

"But... I noticed a few goods in the village that I'm sure can't be found around here, like those decorations that Elmer prepared."

"Hmm. And?"

"That mayor bothers me, as well. He told me 'You're not the peddler'. It's safe to assume that they receive oil and other essentials from this peddler... but if such a person exists, then where is he coming from?"

"Indeed... Now that you mention it, it is rather strange."

But Maiza wasn't finished, and he continued laying out his doubts to Nile.

"I just can't understand. This castle, this village... A place of this size might avoid a wide-area scan, but a precise observation satellite would no doubt capture it accurately... and not only that, this is a time when aerial photos are a matter of course. There must be a public institution somewhere that knows all about the way this land is being used."

"Hmm, really?"

"Yes, and more than anything else, the very fact that one individual is in possession of this much land is very peculiar. This country wouldn't look kindly on such things."

As they approached the section made of reddish dirt, the two tall men stooped as they walked on. The tunnel was so moist they almost expected drops of water to fall from the ceiling, but they continued talking, heedless of the mud smearing their clothes.

"In other words, someone is pulling strings."

"It would be stranger if someone wasn't. It's the 21st century and this village is still completely isolated from the outside world. No matter what the circumstances, there's no way that human rights organizations and the mass media would stand for such a thing."

"Such a thing wouldn't have been so strange three centuries ago."

"It's no different now. The situation is a bit different, but remarkable stories always come and go according to the times."

"Is that so? I suppose you're right. Now that I think of it... Maiza, do you use the internet?"

"Not much. I haven't stayed at one place much during the last thirty years, after all. And furthermore... this is a bit embarrassing, but the circumstances of today are a bit frightening. Consider that the information and experiences we accumulated over three centuries can be accessed in the space of a day through the internet... Though I called home and it seems that some of the organization's members have become rather obsessed with it."

"Among us, Huey, I think, is probably skilled in using it."

"Once we found our way outside, Elmer would most likely buy a computer too."

The two made their way to the end of the tunnel, filling the space with idle chatter.

The dirt walls had melted back into stonework somewhere along the way, and to the left of the dead end that faced them there were rocks sticking out of the wall, leading upwards like a ladder. Maiza pointed the light at the ceiling, and they could see there a square hole blocked by a stone cover.

"It seems we're supposed to head up."

"If I were to bet on it, I would say we're in the cemetery. Tunnels like this always lead to such things."

"Then I'll bet that we're next to the well behind the castle."

After cheerfully making their predictions, Nile made his way up the stone ladder and carefully slid back the cover. Gravel and dirt rained down from above, and Maiza unconsciously raised both hands to block the barrage.

The stone cover moved back, and thin lines of light shone between Maiza's fingers.

Nile poked his head out and looked around... then shoved the lid completely out of the way and spoke, satisfied, under the moon.

"I say this: I won."

They found themselves in a graveyard surrounded by countless trees, and through the tightly gathered conifers they could catch slight glimpses of the castle's rear. It hadn't seemed like they'd been walking that long, but they'd come farther than they thought.

"It seems I lose," Maiza said regretfully as he spun slowly in place, looking around.

It was a small cemetery, with no path leading there that they could see, nor any fence walling it in. The gravestones, about half a dozen in number, were set up almost buried between the trees, so a casual hiker would probably have passed by without noticing.

Most of the graves were unmarked; only the one in front of the stone cover had a strange sentence carved onto it. It was written in an antiquated form of the country's language, as though someone had transcribed a passage spoken by one of the villagers.

[Ye who could not grasp humanity, may you find rest beneath this place.]

The words didn't appear to be that eroded, compared to the overall state of the tombstone. It looked to be a few decades old, at most.

The epitaph bothered Maiza, but Nile, unable to read the language, seemed to have noticed something else. He moved the stone cover back into place and then turned to Maiza.

"I ask you this, Maiza. Have you *noticed, too?*"

Maiza was taken aback for a moment, but soon realized what he meant and nodded.

"Indeed... it seems that it wasn't just a gut feeling."

"Hmm..."

They'd felt a strange sense of disharmony as they walked down the tunnel.

There should have been nothing but stones and dirt in the passage, which was built in a straight line, but...

...They had felt in there *the presence of something other than themselves.*

It wasn't something like a mole or a bat, but at the same time it felt slightly different from the air of a human being. They couldn't imagine what it looked like, but from the very air around them they instinctively realized that "something" was there.

It was as though a heavy gaze was pressing in on them from all directions. That was the reason they'd made such an effort to keep the conversation going as they walked down the tunnel.

"I say this: there was definitely 'something' in there with us."

"...Perhaps some sort of evil creature."

"Hardly."

"It must have just been a feeling."

"Hmm. I will chalk it up to that."

The two exchanged brief glances, then laughed sheepishly and strode through the trees toward the castle.

While still feeling a certain chilling presence lurking beneath the closed stone cover.

"Then... that's the only reason you became an alchemist, Ms. Sylvie?"

"Well, that's not really it."

Sylvie and the others continued their conversation in the old castle's drawing room. At first Felt had been hesitant to speak, but soon he found himself entranced by the "past" that she revealed. To be precise, by the "outside world" of which she spoke. From time to time she used words he couldn't understand, but once he realized that all of them meant "outside," curiosity surged strongly within him.

Perhaps she knew of the boy's feelings, and perhaps she didn't. Sylvie only smiled alluringly at him like before.

"My interest in an impossible dream like 'eternal beauty' came from a fairy tale I heard as a child. The people who want it in stories are always witches or evil queens, but I thought that it would be okay for maybe one person in the world to achieve that absurd ideal."

The look in Sylvie's eyes changed a bit. Czes, who knew of her past, was the only one who saw the sadness that flashed briefly in her eyes.

"I told that to my boyfriend, and he said, 'Appearances aren't everything'. He told me that he liked me just fine as I was. And... he asked me to marry him and live with him forever if we succeeded in gaining immortality. But that's why the thought came to me. I had to be the most beautiful woman in the world. Then I'd marry him. So that he could be proud that his wife was the world's most beautiful woman. Silly, isn't it? That's why... I didn't drink the liquor of immortality right then."

Sylvie looked up at nothing, her gaze unfocused, as though saddened.

Perhaps he felt something about her, for Felt hesitated before asking her, "Umm... so what happened to him?"

"You know the man who wears glasses? He's called Maiza."

The boy heaved a sigh of relief. Sylvie had fulfilled her wish and was still living happily together with her lover.

But... her story wasn't quite finished.

"He was Maiza's younger brother. I told you about Szilard earlier, right? Szilard ate him first of all."

"Ah..."

Sylvie smiled a sadly, leaving Felt at a complete loss for words.

But soon enough her smile found its allure again and she waved her hand casually.

"Ah, sorry, don't worry about it. Mmm... let's talk about something else."

Felt waited a second and slowly opened his mouth.

"This question might seem a little stupid, but..."

He looked away, embarrassed, and gave voice to what he wanted. The fear he'd shown them before was replaced by eager inquisitiveness.

"Tell me... about the outside. About what kind of place it is... I want to know... more."

I stand in the shadow of the door and eavesdrop on their conversation.

I know it is wrong, but I cannot withhold my curiosity.

And once again I begin to think, "just maybe."

At first it seemed as though Master Felt was wary of Mistress Sylvie, but now he looks very happy. Master Felt had always felt less disgust for Master Elmer and I than the other villagers, but from the tone of his voice now I do not think he feels any revulsion at all regarding Mistress Sylvie.

I... imagined a conclusion. How many *decades* has it been since I bothered to do such useless things? Time and again I have imagined an ideal future, and time and again I have been betrayed.

But this time, this time it feels like my wish may be granted.

Until yesterday, every time I tried to draw the future in my mind I was assaulted by pain.

The violence wielded by Master Dez made me remember that direct agony.

But things are different now. I do not know what is going on, but... when I think of Master Felt's face, I do not have to remember the pain Master Dez visited upon me.

Master Felt will convince the villagers not to fear Master Elmer, and then nobody will be hurt, and then...

...if this village becomes connected with the outside world...

How joyous that would be.

I cannot leave this village. But if more people like Master Elmer come from outside and help this place advance, then that will be enough to satisfy me.

I was born in a bottle, and I cannot survive outside of the flask that is this forest.

But still, I wish. Even if it is just a tiny bit, for happiness to come to this village, to me.

I have no place to live except this town, so...

I can wish for happiness.

Ah, I remember. I remember clearly. This emotion is joy.

Is there anything that is within my power I can do to ensure this village will not disappear?

If this joy becomes a reality...

Then surely, surely I will be able to smile like Master Elmer.

The same time

The mayor's house

There were five very similar girls who lived in the village.

Not a single one of the villagers could say for certain who they were and where they had *appeared* from.

They had existed ever since the current generation of villagers had first learned to recognize things, and naturally the girls melted seamlessly into the village. The old ones seemed to know something more, but none among them spoke a word of it before they passed on.

There were always five of them, and they didn't seem to grow at all. Once every few years, whenever one of them weakened visibly... a couple of days would pass, and she would be replaced by a new girl.

It seemed like the story of an occult movie, but the villagers weren't particularly terrified.

The girls were obviously different from them, but perhaps because they had grown up knowing them, the townspeople came to regard them completely as "things that were naturally that way."

In other words, they treated the girls the same way they treated "outside."

It wasn't as though asking them would yield a clear answer, and though there had been a handful of people who had attempted to observe the "switch," they suffered the same fate as those unfortunate souls who left in search of "outside."

As such things continued to happen, the villagers tormented the girls more and more.

And that process was accelerated thanks to the efforts of the current mayor, Dez Nibil.

Dez made it a point to abuse them and exploit them for free labor, and at times even beat them. But the girls, instead of rebelling, wordlessly completed the tasks that were given to them with nary a complaint as long as they were given the bare minimum of food needed to survive.

Once things settled like that, the villagers slowly came to mimic Dez... and at present, there was hardly anyone left in the entire village who cared at all for the girls' wants and opinions.

They didn't even notice the fact that all of the girls had the same name...

As Sylvie regaled his son with tales of "outside," Dez Nibil, the man who had made his village abuse the girls, sat alone in a wooden chair in his home, his upper body leaning bonelessly against the back.

To the man who had lost his wife, the biggest house in the village seemed too large.

"Hmph."

Alone in his room, the mustached man stared sightlessly at nothing.

And then, still alone, he murmured quietly to the ceiling...

"...The time has come. For this village... and this body."

His face frozen in a humorless laugh, Dez kept his silence.

He looked outside and saw that clouds were slowly beginning to appear in the previously clear sky.

"And for *them* as well..."

Dez grinned silently, secure in the knowledge that it would soon begin to snow.

His flat smirk appeared together with the silence... and slowly sank into it.

Night

In front of the castle gate

"Umm... I, today, uh... sorry for bothering you."

Sylvie smiled softly as Felt clumsily said his goodbyes.

"It's alright. Come again if you want."

"Of course! But the snow's going to fall in earnest soon... So I can't say when I'll have the chance."

Felt seemed reluctant to leave, but no matter how much he might wish it, he couldn't stay at the castle. So after giving Sylvie many goodbyes he prepared to give her one last farewell before leaving.

"I'll tell the villagers all about you. I don't know why the man called Elmer keeps demanding living sacrifices, but I know for certain that you are all really good people!"

"You probably shouldn't."

Czes had quietly observed them up until then, but as Felt turned to go he finally spoke and stopped him.

"The villagers are extremely suspicious. If you come back and suddenly all you've got to say about us is praise, they might think that we've stolen your soul or something. So you should just say something like, 'I don't know what they were up to, but I think they're not being aggressive at the moment'."

Felt's eyes widened for a moment, but after giving it a moment of thought he nodded.

"You have a point. But I'll try my best to tell them the truth... Anyway, goodbye!"

Once again bidding them farewell, Felt returned to his village.

"What's the occasion? It's not like you to give warnings like that."

"Shut up, I can do what I want."

...It'll leave a bad taste in my mouth if we end up inadvertently starting a witch hunt.

That was the main reason why Czes has chosen to speak, but it was true that the good impression that Felt gave him had been a factor as well. As he reflected on the fact that he was weak to children, he remembered that something similar had happened in the past.

He was remembering the girl he'd met on a train seventy years ago... when suddenly, the memories of the events that had happened on that train came to life as well. Like the train, this village was also an enclosed space. An indescribable nervousness made itself known to the immortal who looked like a boy, but in the end he put it out of his mind as a needless worry.

...That's right, there's no Rail Tracer in this village.

Lamenting his own cowardice inside his head, Czes quietly turned and went back inside the castle.

"Humdeedum, ladida, dadumdidumdum... ah."

The man humming strangely as he decorated the roof suddenly stopped and checked his wristwatch.

"What're the others doing?"

"...They are gathered in the drawing room, discussing ways to find you, Master Elmer," the girl next to him replied calmly, as Elmer gleefully lay out a red and white curtain.

"Ahaha, I see. Then I suppose I'll be able to stay here for a bit longer," he said, going back to his work with another round of meaningless ditties.

A few minutes later, finished with his preparations to lay out the red and white curtain, Elmer turned again to the girl.

"They still in the drawing room?"

"...Yes."

The girl hadn't moved a step from where she stood, but still she accurately reported the situation in a far removed area.

"Right then. I'll use this opportunity to move. I'll look for a chance to hang the curtain on the night of the 31st."

Elmer stretched cheerfully and walked toward the steps leading downward. And just as he was about to step into the tower where the steps were...

"Humdrumdeedum, lalala... la... la?"

The gleeful notes suddenly shifted to sounds of surprise.

The moment he'd stepped inside the open entrance, Nile and Maiza sprang from the shadows and grabbed hold of his arms.

"Eh? What's this? This can't be right. She told me you were in the drawing room."

Elmer looked confused, then suddenly gave a great surprised shout.

"Do, don't tell me one of you can stop time?!"

"Of course not."

"Then how... wait."

Elmer frozen, then swung his body around, Nile and Maiza still holding his arms.

"Phil."

The girl who'd been following Elmer around looked extremely like Phil. Apparently named Phil as well, the girl trembled violently the moment her eyes met his.

"My, my apologies, Master Elmer!"

"There's no need to apologize," a smooth voice said, as Sylvie and Czes revealed themselves from under the stairs.

"Sylvie... you can't teach other people to lie like that!"

"Excuse me? All I did was teach her that some lies are alright to tell, and some aren't. Especially when it comes to dealing with you."

Another Phil peeked guiltily out from behind Sylvie. Elmer caught sight of her and sighed, defeated.

"Aha, so you've figured it out, eh. I didn't think you'd catch on quite so fast."

He smiled sadly and gave the answer they already knew.

"Phil is all the same person."

"A homunculus, right?"

They moved as a group to the castle's dining room and sat Elmer down on a chair again. He promised that he wouldn't run this time, so they refrained from tying him up.

"That's right," Elmer said, surprisingly calm. "When did you find out?"

"There were many factors, though we only arrived at a sure conclusion while talking it over a moment ago, exchanging the information we'd gathered."

Maiza moved his gaze to the other side of the room as he spoke. Four girls stood there side by side, staring quietly back at them with worried eyes.

"Sylvie realized that those children shared one consciousness. She put together the incongruities raised by the village boy's stories. Furthermore, according to Czes, even though he observed them for quite some time, and though they passed on our messages to you, he never saw any of them actually talk to you. The same goes for the rest of us. Not only that, but you traveled all over the castle, working on this and that. How could you have avoided us without security cameras? You had those girls observe us for you."

"Oh, smashing. You're talking like a detective."

"I'm serious."

Maiza scolded Elmer's flippant attitude with a grim glare and moved to the heart of the matter.

"We discovered books about alchemy in this castle's study. All of them were on the subject of homunculi, from widely accepted texts to obscure heretic books. But it's unlikely that you gathered all of those books. After all, if we're to believe your story, those children were already here when you arrived at this village."

Elmer was silent.

"Tell us for certain this time. Not only about the nature of those children, but also about the secret of this village."

Perhaps influenced by the seriousness of Maiza's voice, Elmer, too, replied gravely, "I'll tell you in February."

"Elmer."

"No, I'm serious, too. Someone's going to come in February who'll be able to tell you all about this much better than I ever could."

"Who?" Sylvie asked, wondering who could possibly come to this isolated land.

"The *peddler*, that's who."

The others exchanged glances, half of them looking as though they'd expected as much; the other half looking utterly surprised. Satisfied by their reaction, Elmer grinned broadly and asked Maiza a question of his own.

"Well, Maiza, I'm surprised you kept your cool like that. She's not quite properly made, but she is a homunculus, after all, a creation surpassing the realm of modern biotechnology."

This time it was Maiza's turn to chuckle mischievously.

"Yes, well, I know someone very similar in New York, you see."

Czes smirked wryly at Maiza's quip, and Elmer, perhaps having sensed something, fell silent. Nile and Sylvie, on the other hand, merely stared blankly at Maiza's face.

Countless snowflakes drifted by outside the window.

As though closing a lid on the entire area, a layer of white and a veil of silence fell over the lands surrounded by forest.



CHAPTER 4
KIDOAIRAKU: ANGER
Nile

And so, many truly uneventful days passed.

Nothing out of the ordinary happened.

The three visitors no longer prodded Master Elmer for answers, and instead spent their time researching the forest's wildlife, exploring the castle, and preparing for the upcoming celebrations.

Master Elmer taught me of many different celebrations upon arriving in the forest. He would explain the various events for each season, and reenact them inside the castle. From his explanations it seemed that the outside world was divided into many large communities known as "countries," and each country had its own unique celebrations.

The snow fell thick in the season of winter, but Master Elmer walked about the castle happily even then.

One winter he scared the villagers dressed up as a creature he called a krampus, and the next he did the same, only dressed as a monster he said was named namahage. In autumn, he dressed me in strange clothes, saying that it was time for Halloween. I would walk about in these clothes, and for some reason Master Elmer would give me treats upon seeing me. I thought it a quaint event. Master Elmer, too, donned an odd set of clothing and went down to the village, enjoying himself while surprising the villagers. And through these excursions to the town, I feel that the townspeople came to see Master Elmer more and more as something to be feared.

Also, as a time he called summer solstice approached, he would gather leafy branches together to make a large green object. He said that it was part of a ceremony observed by the people of the country right next to the forest, one meant to ensure that the sun would continue to shine forever. But... I wonder if Master Elmer knew that the villagers saw the object hung up on the day the sun rose highest and muttered darkly to themselves of demonic rituals.

Master Elmer also took eggs from the chickens inside the castle, carefully saving the shells after eating and then coloring them in vivid tones come spring. It was meant to celebrate the birth of someone, and Master Elmer said that normally we would have to abstain from meat for a week and color the eggs red. But then he laughed and said, "Well, it's not like I actually believe in it, so there's no need to follow things to the letter. I think we'll be like the Japanese and only follow the formalities enough to enjoy ourselves, what do you say?" So said, he decorated the castle with his colorful eggs... but the villagers watched from afar and once again seemed to think it a terrifying rite. I heard them whisper to themselves that he was sacrificing chicks to curse them. But I had not the courage to tell them otherwise, and instead bowed my head quietly.

A celebration he never forgot was called "Christmas." On this day, a man named "Santa Claus" would come and deliver happiness to everyone in the world. I told him, "Then everyone must be happy," but Master Elmer only laughed and said there was no way a

person could give everyone in the world a present in a single night. I supposed he was right.

But after saying that, Master Elmer then said, "And that's why I'm taking his place for you," and every year gave me a present.

Sometimes they were ornaments made of paper, and sometimes dishes that Master Elmer cooked himself, and sometimes dolls carved from wood. Instead of being happy at receiving such presents, I felt a deep sense of guilt. Why did Master Elmer only do this for me and nobody else? I asked him, and he gave me a simple reply.

"That's easy. It's because you're the one who smiles least in the village."

I felt guiltier still upon hearing that. I could not give him a sincere smile, even though I know I should. When I tried to school my features into the approximation of one, Master Elmer shook his head and said, "Don't force it. If you force a smile, then your face will be twisted when you want to smile for real."

And so this year's Christmas came as well - and Master Elmer seemed busier than ever. He darted, laughing, all over the castle, hiding from his guests while decorating the inside of the building and setting off fireworks at suppertime.

He saw me paralyzed with worry and laughed as though he had just remembered something.

"Your present this year is those four."

I cocked my head to one side, unable to understand, and Master Elmer's laughter trailed off. And then, smiling gently, he said, "Try and get along with them. They might be able to help you smile for real."

And so, many truly uneventful days passed. I still cannot smile or laugh. But something is different now. I can feel it inside myself. Upon the arrival of Master Maiza and his companions, I once almost found myself grasped by hate, but that unwelcome emotion soon became hazy and faded away. I have discovered "hope."

This time is called "new years," and it is apparently a time for all to celebrate the coming of a new time. Last year, Master Elmer bought a great bundle of things he called "fireworks" from the peddler and set them off in the forest, saying that it was a method of celebration from the east. Needless to say, that too contributed toward the villagers' fear of him. Master Elmer seemed to know it as well, but his grin stayed the same as ever. He seemed to be enjoying it.

Today, too, is supposed to be another eastern day of celebration, this time observed by eating seven different kinds of boiled plants. Master Elmer and Mistress Sylvie are boiling water inside the castle in preparation. Master Nile wakes up from his day-long

nap from time to time to play with the three horses in the stable, and Master Czes spends his time reading the books in the library. Master Maiza often looks for me and asks me questions, but sadly I know almost nothing about myself. All I can remember are small tidbits in the deep recesses of my memory, but Master Maiza listens seriously to every one of them. And always he thanks me after listening to my hesitant stories.

I want to help him more, but I can remember almost nothing of my past. All that stays in my mind is the memory of being abused by the villagers. And even those are slowly being erased, painted over.

After the arrival of Master Elmer, and Master Maiza and his companions after that, every day, new memories are covering up those old wounds.

Aah, yes. This must be the emotion known as joy.

I almost smile, but then I remember the atmosphere in the village.

Around this time of the year, the townspeople always sharply reduce their time outside their houses.

I do not know what the villagers are thinking after Master Felt's visit to the castle. They would never tell me outright, and even if they did have some sort of plan in mind, it would most certainly be impossible to carry out in this heavy snowfall.

...February.

When the time that Master Elmer calls "February" comes...

The peddler arrives from "outside."

After he leaves, a live sacrifice is given to Master Elmer.

This year, too, it will no doubt be me. This will mark the first time in five years that I have been gathered in one place.

Suddenly, a thought occurs to me.

Yes, then I shall smile. Brightly, like Master Elmer, like Mistress Sylvie. If I smile so suddenly, then Master Elmer will surely be surprised. And then he will laugh for me.

What shall I do. I must practice.

I must take care not to be noticed. Carefully, carefully...

And time marches on...

February

The old castle

One day, after January had passed and the sun shone brightly day after day... the peddler arrived.

His "carriage" served as a clear reminder that despite the quaintly antiquated ways of the village, the time was indeed the 21st century.

"My, my..."

About when the sun had risen to its highest point in the sky, the sudden rumbling that filled the air drew Maiza's party out of the castle's main gate.

It was a colossal snowmobile, roughly modeled after a truck.

"What's going on?"

Czes and Sylvie made their way around to the driver's seat, seeking to peer inside the great vehicle that had parked itself in front of the castle. But the windows had been specially treated, tinted black like those of a politician's car.

When they looped around to the front, they could see the faint outline of the driver through the windshield... but the moment they laid eyes on him, they were seized by a feeling of foreboding.

The thing sitting in the driver's seat was no doubt a human being, but he was wearing a black facemask that covered his entire head, and a helmet that looked to be of military make. He wore goggles, making it impossible to see his eyes... but from the way his head was turned, it gave the impression that he in turn was staring out at Maiza's party as well.

"Surprised, eh? Or just feeling a bit homesick for the outside world?" a voice said from behind them, light as ever.

"That's the peddler... though he never actually steps outside of his car to peddle, what."

Elmer brushed past his still tongue-tied friends and turned to face the driver. Waving his hand vaguely at the people behind him, he said, "You understand, don't you? Be a good chap and give them a ride on your way back..."

"Wha-"

The engine's roar drowned out Czes's words, the tires spitting out a blizzard of snow as the truck turned and made its way back down the snowy mountain road. The path was only a tiny bit wider than the truck itself; if another car had come up the road, both would have had to stop. But the truck rumbled on, secure in the knowledge that such a thing would never happen.

"He'll be back in an hour," Elmer said, and promptly reentered the castle, leaving the remaining four staring wordlessly at where the truck had been.

The only things left were the questions inside their minds... and the colossal tire tracks in the snow, stark and real as though to prove that it was not a dream.

The peddler has come to the village.

The villagers rush to the carriage and exchange the crops and goods they have made during the winter for things like oil and cloth. But nobody comes down from the carriage's seat, and everyone simply follows the guidelines for trade written on the side.

Perhaps there are those among them who might think to take without giving in return, but still the peddler never leaves his iron chair.

According to Mistress Sylvie, it is not a carriage, but something called an "automobile." Similar to what Master Maiza and his companions arrived in, but this vehicle is much bulkier and more powerful.

I do not dislike watching the peddler's trade. If I observe from afar, nobody glares at me in disgust, and everyone's faces are lively and joyful.

Up until now, what I felt for this annual scene was truly neutral, a mere lack of dislike, but perhaps now, I can say truthfully that I enjoy watching.

Naturally, the villagers find the peddler unsettling in their own way. He is an outsider, after all, a symbol of the alien unknown they strive so hard to deny. But unlike other outsiders, the peddler does not attempt to interfere in the workings of the village - indeed, he has been coming and going since before the eldest of the surviving elders was born, more a part of the village than anyone else - and so the adults pretend not to notice him, and the children follow their example.

I was like that as well, a quietly ignored part of the village just like the peddler. But after Master Dez became mayor, that tradition died a quiet death. For some reason, Master Dez regarded me as something to be detested and abused, and forthwith, the villagers followed his example...

Enough. Those unhappy times went on for so long that my memories of them are buried deep in chaos. If I try to remember them too clearly, I fear that the light that has been flickering before me may be smothered, extinguished.

Ah. Now I realize that the light is becoming steadily brighter.

Perhaps it is thanks to Master Elmer and Mistress Sylvie and their friends, and Master Felt. Thanks to them, I can see this light even lying where I am, in the depths of deepest darkness...

I was wrong when I thought that Master Felt did not hate me, but did not help me either. He helped me. He did not despise me. He talked to me. Is that not a form of help? Perhaps not in the strictest sense of the word, but I decided to believe it was true.

Perhaps it is because of the hope floating right before my eyes.

That the sky seems so blue, so high, so much more than before.

Someone begins talking quietly behind me as I watch the townspeople. It is Master Elmer's voice.

I glanced at his face, away from the bustling trade. Master Elmer's face is set in a cheerful smile, as always.

"Say, Phil. Maiza and I are thinking of hitching a ride outside when the peddler comes back today. That is, we're going to visit the place you were born."

"Excuse me?"

"If you're all right with it... I want to show you the truth. It might be a shocking affair, but then again maybe you'll feel relieved when that riddle's done with, what? Either way, I'd like for you to make the decision."

I have no reason to refuse.

Truthfully, I am nervous as well. I am afraid that by learning everything about myself, I might witness my life crashing down before me. That this forest, my flask, will shatter.

But now, now... I feel that I can accept whatever I may find.

This is something I must go through to truly smile... a trial I must overcome. I felt it so strongly, it almost overwhelmed me.

"I'll go," I say, in a strong tone unlike any I have voiced before.

"I wish to know... who I really am."

As I said those words inside the castle, the me in the village was looking at Master Dez.

He stands beside the truck, ignoring the bustle and commotion and staring at me.

Did I unwittingly do something to rouse his ire?

A flash of memory, of the pain that comes with being struck, makes me curl up instinctively, but...

Master Dez turns and leaves without a word.

This fills my heart with a strange sense of foreboding.

Master Dez's actions echo strongly in my mind, but I wished to focus on Master Elmer's words, and so I decide to bury them deep inside me.

If my memory serves me correctly, Master Dez smiled at me... for the first time since he was elected mayor.

But it was a smile completely different from Master Elmer's, one that revealed nothing...

A smile so frightfully cold that it felt as though I would freeze where I stood.

Afternoon

A path inside the forest

"I must say, Elmer, it's been a while since I've felt being jostled around inside the luggage compartment."

"Like a cow on her way to the butcher, eh?"

Packed loosely inside the great snowmobile truck's storage container, Maiza, Elmer, and (one of) Phil were knocked right and left. The vehicle plowed so strongly through the snow that each vibration became a deep rumble that ran through their very bones.

Until just recently, Phil had been looking around wide-eyed, but now, perhaps exhausted from the sudden excitement, she was fast asleep, using a sack of flour one of the villagers had loaded on as a pillow.

"But say, Maiza."

"Yes?"

Elmer cleared his throat, and Maiza stretched, chasing away the sleep that had been about to overtake him.

"About Nile. Why's he got that mask on?"

"...Must you pick now of all times to ask?"

"No, but! When we first met again it was such a commotion that the window of opportunity sailed clear away! And asking later, well, let's say, you do know, don't you? And well, don't you suppose that he would have come out with it already if he'd meant for me to know? It'd be fine if he just snorted and said something like, 'You truly pick the worst topics for idle conversation,' but I wouldn't want him to really get mad."

"Yes, Nile does get out of hand when he gets angry," Maiza said, smiling lopsidedly as he remembered the masked man's rages.

"His mask is... a sort of insurance."

"Insurance?"

"He thinks that perhaps if one of our right hands were to find its way onto his forehead, that mask might protect him. In other words, that if there is something between the flesh of our hands and that of his forehead, he might be able to prevent his death."

"Ah... I see. Well then, that's awfully shy of him, wouldn't you say?"

...A bit different from Czes's situation, what. Elmer thought to himself, but as though sensing his thoughts, Maiza chuckled and added an explanation.

"It's not that he doesn't trust us. According to him..."

"Imagine for a moment that we were out camping somewhere. In your foolish dreams, you spy a delicious melon and grasp it in your right hand. And in that dream, you think to yourself, 'I want to eat it!' But the melon was my head. Asleep and unaware, I would be dead in the blink of an eye. I say this: if I were to end up eaten by one of you, I would accept it as my fate, but I cannot allow myself such an ignoble death. That is all."

"Hahaha, that silly git! He *is* shy!"

Maiza smiled as Elmer doubled up laughing, then quietly said, "But I do believe that that's not the real reason."

"Hmm?"

"Nile told me... he spent nearly three hundred years on the various war zones of the world. Right in the middle of the worst hotspots, the very front lines."

"..."

"I don't know what he was looking for there, or what he saw... but maybe what happened on those battlefields has something to do with the mask he wears. Granted, this is just a simple hypothesis..."

Maiza smiled again, as though understanding his old companion. Elmer stared at him for a while, and then smirked, relieved.

"I see you've been with good company, Maiza," he said suddenly.

"Dare I ask what sort of conclusion you've just made?"

"Well, I just thought that your smile's gotten brighter since we last parted ways three centuries ago."

Maiza's smile widened.

"Do you think so?"

"Of course. I think Czes could smile like you if he was just a bit more honest with himself," Elmer muttered, thinking of the conversation he'd had with Czes on the rooftop.

"Hmm? Czes?"

"No, no, it's nothing."

It seemed for a moment as though the conversation would die there, but Elmer chose just that moment to speak up again.

"Anyway, is that demon chap feeling well? I believe he's one of your fellow camorrista these days?"

"..."

Struck suddenly silent, Maiza could only stare at Elmer's mischievous smile.

"Surprised, eh?"

"How."

"Well, old boy, we had a little bit of a talk, him and I, all that time ago."

Elmer burst into laughter, in higher spirits than usual at getting Maiza's poker face to crack.

Maiza cocked his head curiously, but decided that Elmer wouldn't tell him even if pressured and decided to file it away for later.

"And that got me thinking, is there anyone among you lot who's still dabbling in alchemy?"

"...Czes was until just recently, but I washed my hands of it long ago. The same for Sylvie and Nile. Having achieved the goal of eternal life, I don't see anyone still trying their hand at it, unless they made a hobby of research... Right. Perhaps... Huey, maybe."

Hearing his old friend's name, Elmer stared out at the sky.

"Aah, yes. Right, right. It might not be alchemy, but you can bet that he's up to some sort of testing out there somewhere."

"He *is* the sort of person who ran tests on the possibility of conquering a country through immortality, after all."

"Ah... I do want to see him, after all this time. Him and Denkuro and Veg and Victor."

Perhaps moved by the forlorn expression on Elmer's face, Maiza, too, reminisced for a moment about their old companions.

"Then you can go and see them. After you leave this village."

"Right, right, of course. And to do that I'll need your help, Maiza."

"Hmm? What's that supposed to... ah."

Before Maiza could finish asking his question, the truck suddenly slowed down. A metallic sound came from the front. They couldn't see what was going on from their place in the storage area, but it was probably the sound of a door opening.

Seconds later, the truck accelerated once more and suddenly they were plunged into pitch darkness.

"...A tunnel."

"We're almost there."

The tunnel soon passed, and light flooded the compartment again. Maiza stared hard at the landscape that passed them by, but it was far more desolate than he had expected.

And before he could even start to observe things properly, the truck slowed down once more, finally coming to a stop.

"What, did you think there'd be a city hidden in the middle of nowhere or something? In that case, awfully sorry to disappoint."

They found themselves in some sort of laboratory.

Maiza stuck his head out of the back and looked around, ignoring Elmer's chuckles. They were in a great warehouse... it seemed as though it had been built solely to conceal the tunnel. It was like a huge dock built and then dragged up above the sea. There were a few people around, and from the looks of their uniforms and the guns hanging from their belts, it was obvious that they were very different indeed from the people of the village.

Gazing around, taking in the security guards and the concrete floor, Maiza felt as though he was phasing into another dimension. His brain, which until just ten minutes ago had been comfortably ensconced in a fantasy world, suddenly found itself facing the reality of 21st century Earth. He even felt a mild sense of culture shock at seeing the unfamiliar yet familiar signs of civilization, and upon realizing so he smirked sheepishly at his own naivety.

One of the guards noticed Maiza peeking out and walked toward the vehicle, one hand resting on the butt of his pistol. Seeing as how he didn't signal to his fellows before approaching, it appeared he didn't have any formal military training.

"May I ask what happens now?" Maiza asked calmly, as though this sort of thing happened every day.

"We'll be fine. They won't shoot. Not right away, at least," Elmer said, still sitting in the truck and stroking the sleeping Phil's face. "So keep that knife of yours tucked away."

"All right."

Maiza moved his own hand casually away from his hip and waited for the guard to make the first move. But before anything could happen, the sound of a door opening came from the front

of the truck, and after giving whoever was there a brief glance... the guard turned away and walked back as though nothing had happened.

And as though to fill the space left behind by the departing guard, there came a gloomy and grave old man's voice, the very sound of it like someone had taken the concept of fatigue and distilled it into something that could be heard.

"So you... are Elmer's companion."

A large old man walked into view, holding a pair of goggles and a mask that looked like he'd just taken them off. It was obvious he was the driver.

The old man's gaze moved into the corner of the rear compartment, taking in the waving Elmer, and the girl sleeping beside him. The tension bled from his face only to be replaced by a complicated expression, and he sighed heavily.

And he told Maiza his name...

The moment the words reached his ears, Maiza's face grew cold and hard as stone.

"I am Bild Quates, the caretaker of this forest... Though that is not the name you would find in the official documents."

The me who is traveling with Master Elmer opens my eyes, sensing a commotion nearby.

I would not normally fall asleep, but perhaps because of an overload of excitement, or perhaps because of the rocking motion the compartment made as we rode through the forest, I nodded off completely.

I am still inside the storage compartment, a familiar sight stretching before my eyes.

I remember this place. *This is where I come when I die.*

Ah, I see Master Quates standing in front of Master Maiza. How many years has it been since I last saw him. He who kills me and gives me life again. He tells me nothing else about myself, and I in turn ask him nothing. But perhaps now, I feel that I can ask him many things.

I am feeling joyful today, and what is more, Master Elmer and Master Maiza are here together with me.

But...

Why, I wonder, is Master Maiza's expression so harsh.

It is the first time I have ever seen such a look on his face.

A small seed of anxiety begins to grow in my heart, as a multitude of catastrophic scenarios unfold in my mind.

Aah, I think now I understand... why Master Elmer values laughter and smiling so much.

When I see Master Maiza's expression, somehow I become struck with unease as well.

Please smile, Master Maiza. Please...

"I'll tell you the truth. That fellow is old man Szilard's descendant. I don't think they've ever met, though," Elmer explained calmly, pacing around the warehouse.

"They even look alike, don't they? Well, yes... I was quite surprised myself, the first time I smuggled myself in here and saw him. Not that I could see much, granted, what with the way the guards were beating me."

"..."

It seemed that even Elmer's foolish antics, which normally Maiza would have acknowledged with a calm smile, were lost on him right now. He only followed behind the old man, his face set in hard lines of animosity.

But for his part, Elmer wasn't put off in the slightest, and began running his mouth at an even greater pace than before.

"Come now, Maiza. Why the scary face? This old man here... well, I guess technically we're older than him, but... Anyway, this man's got nothing to do with Szilard anymore. He's a fine fellow who's devoted his life's work to something he didn't even really want to do."

"Life's work?" Maiza asked, though his voice was still uncharacteristically cold. "...By that, do you mean trapping those innocent people inside a forest, isolating them from the outside world?"

"Calm down, I'm telling you. You're scaring Phil."

Maiza flinched, his gaze flickering to the small girl, taking in the way she hid behind Elmer and stared back at him with wide, frightened eyes.

"...I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. If you're feeling up to apologizing, then just smile for her like you always do. That'll calm her down."

Elmer snickered and patted Phil on the back. Maiza, perhaps finally regaining a hold of his senses, smiled awkwardly at her as well.

And as though he had sensed the conflict wrapping up behind him, the man who had introduced himself as Bild began to speak.

"...Where should I begin?"

Bild Quates. The man was a descendant of Szilard Quates, the man who had gained immortality and consumed so many of Maiza's companions on that boat so long ago.

His own grandfather had also been one of Szilard's descendants, and at the same time one of his most promising assistants.

Unsatisfied with an immortal body, Szilard had set about creating homunculi in his endless hunger for knowledge.

It was said that the perfect homunculus was a dwarf inside a flask, and that in exchange for knowledge of everything in the entire universe, its existence was to be confined inside that flask, lest it perish.

Discovering that information on homunculi was among the things he had eaten, Szilard researched them with even greater fervor than before, in search of complete enlightenment.

But despite the fact that time no longer had any meaning for him, Szilard found that working alone was far too inefficient, and so he gave his descendants and other promising disciples each projects of their own to work on.

On the other hand, he never gave up control on his work toward immortality to another alchemist. Even in the making of his incomplete panacea, he would use chemists, untrained in the ways of alchemy, unwilling to trust even his own flesh and blood with his secrets.

Bild's grandfather, working beneath the watchful eye of this suspicious man, one day succeeded in creating a sort of homunculus, working off one of the theories that Szilard had taught him. It knew not the passage of time, for it had been created using Szilard's own immortal cells... but it was also bereft of the complete knowledge of all there was that Szilard had sought so eagerly.

"After that, old man Szilard made and did away with quite a few homunculi, and then taking his last one - a female homunculus named, eh, Ennis? Alice? Something like that - he went away. We know it was his last one because nobody ever heard from him again."

"My grandfather's research was originally based in America, but once Szilard disappeared, he moved back here, to the land of the Quates family. And here, using Szilard's connections and our clan's remaining assets - this land - he continued his own, independent experiments."

"He poured everything he had into developing this forest, all for one enterprise: to experiment with homunculi."

They continued their research toward creating both the perfect homunculus and the fabled grand panacea.

To further their goals to this end, they created two types of homunculi, both based on the incomplete panacea which granted only absolute regeneration, and not eternal life.

The properties of this elixir were reflected in the homunculi they created. The immortality granted by the panacea was created by combining the imbiber with something from a different plane of existence. In fantasy terms, it would be allowing something like an infinitely regenerating colony of organisms to possess the body. That was how Szilard understood his own immortality, and it was what he based all of his research on. This different plane... it might be a parallel universe, or something else entirely. Seeing as how the entity which had granted Szilard immortality had been called a demon, there were some who even theorized in their wildest flights of fancy that this other reality was Hell.

However... the research on homunculi progressed at a snail's pace, and after Szilard's disappearance it ground to a halt completely. But while they carried on their own research, they happened upon a surprising discovery. It was possible to transplant a creature of pure thought, a consciousness which came from the alternate plane, into multiple bodies.

Continuing their experiments, they finally succeeded in perfecting the two forms of incomplete homunculus.

One was male, a kind that grew and aged just like an actual human being.

The other was female, and though it did not age it died quickly. Through many tests and examinations, they discovered that they could stop the aging process, but that was only in terms of outward appearance. In exchange for this outward appearance of youth, the homunculus' lifespan was dramatically shortened - and to make up for this disadvantage, it was decided that there would always be five bodies in operation at once.

"In other words, that's you, Phil," Elmer said with a flourish, like he was revealing the answer on a quiz show.

Bild stopped in front of a door, punching a code into the electronic keypad beside it. While they waited, Elmer calmly added his own theories to the old man's explanation.

"They made it so that when one body aged - though of course you couldn't tell from the looks of you - and found itself on the verge of death, it would return to the facility by itself. I think they could sort of predict about when you'd show up each time."

Maiza glanced sidelong at Phil, attempting to gauge her emotions, but she only nodded, showing nothing on her face. Elmer gently stroked the top of her head and continued.

"Have you ever played a video game? To use one of those as an example, think of one person playing with two controllers. If one side dies, the other can survive long enough to press the continue button and keep going. Or think about it like this. You can see two entrances to the Underground that look separate, but underneath they're connected through tunnels, see? So the entrances above ground would be her bodies, and underground - in the other plane - her consciousness is still connected as one."

As Elmer finished up, the door before them opened up with a subdued grind of motors.

And they beheld...

"...I had thought that things like this were the stuff of science fiction," Maiza managed at last, nonplussed.

Many vast tanks were arrayed before them, large enough for a person to fit in comfortably. Most of them were empty... but inside a few of them which were filled with liquid, they could see something floating inside.

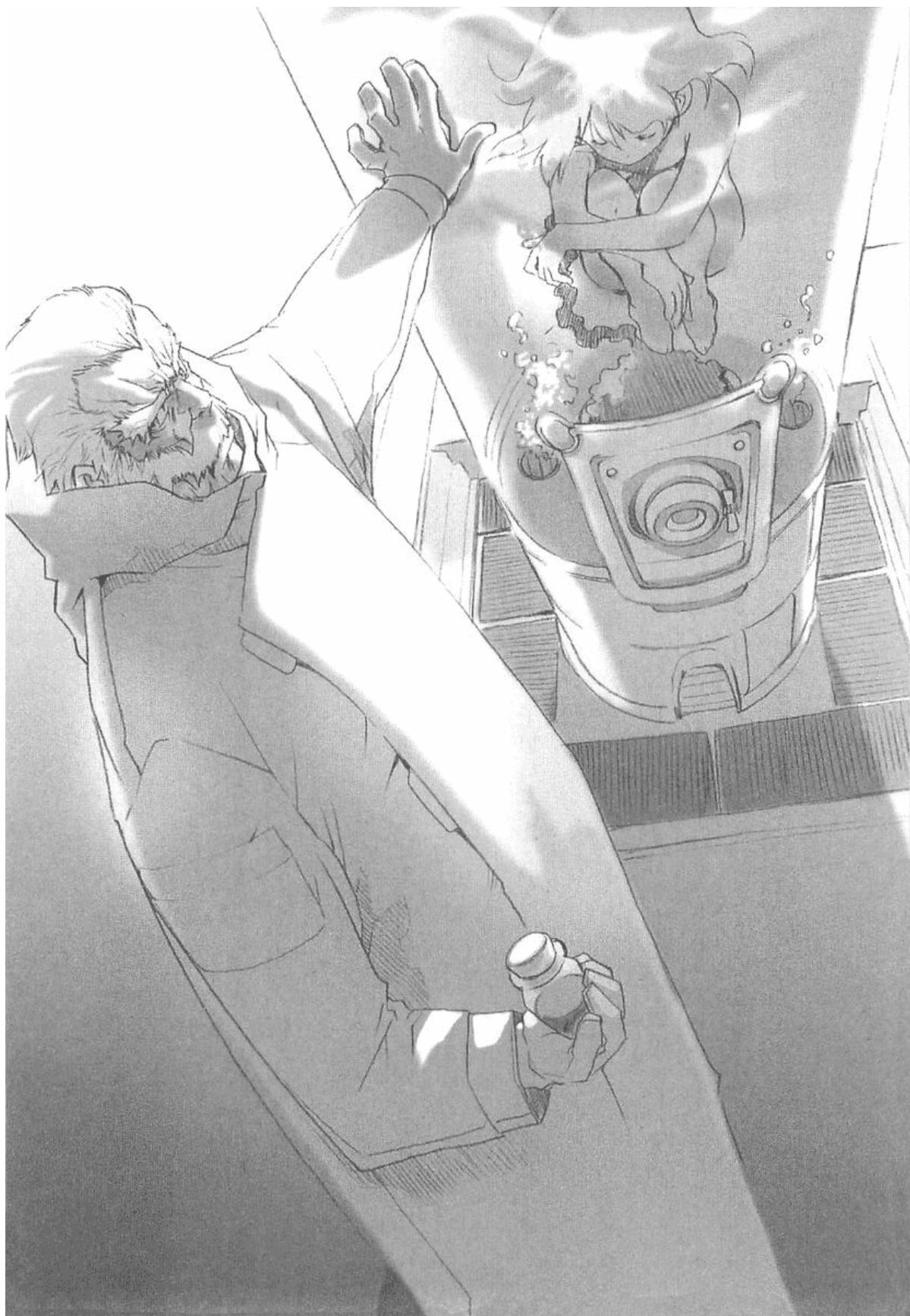
"This is..."

They looked like young human beings, crouched in fetal position inside their tanks. A fleshy line connected their navels to a dark mudlike substance that coated the bottom of the container.

Carefully studying the floating girls, a shadow passed over Maiza's face.

He had been expecting it to some degree, but he still observed with some degree of surprise that the girls in their tanks bore more than a passing resemblance to Phil.

"They're not clones, so they're not really identical. Still, their environment's the same, and the human cells used as the foundation are the same well, so I think they can pass for sisters, at least. Anyway, a body that's died once is processed through a special procedure inside those



tanks... becoming that gunk you see down there. I don't like using this word to describe humans, but I guess you could say they're being recycled."

While Elmer explained, Bild removed a small glass bottle from his pocket.

"This *water*... this is the catalyst we use to hold their consciousness in place."

There was a clear liquid sloshing about inside the flask, indistinguishable at a glance from regular tap water.

"...It looks just like plain water," Maiza observed.

"And what made us into what we are right now just tasted like liquor, didn't it? That stuff's made from the same panacea, albeit incomplete, so it's not that strange that it looks like water."

"You do have a point."

Bild made sure the two had finished their conversation before continuing.

"By applying this water to an *empty* body, the possession is complete. Even one drop is enough. As you can see, their memories and experiences are all concentrated inside this liquid. In other words, it could be said that this water is actually the 'main' body."

"The main body? Do you mean that the water itself has a consciousness of its own?"

This time Elmer butted in. From the light dancing in his eyes it was obvious that he'd been aching to interrupt.

"The water's got no will of its own. It doesn't have a brain to think with, or organs and nerves to feel with. To use that game example from before, you could call it save data. You've got to put that data inside a character, a body, before it can do anything and feel anything. For example, if the water happened to find itself in a human body, it'd be born with human intelligence."

Maiza immediately realized what Elmer meant and closed his mouth, lost in thought.

"I suppose that to humans, that intelligence would seem unbelievably smart. Think about it. It can control five, no, maybe even more, human bodies at once. I wonder what it'd be like if it escaped the confines of our universe and we could see its true form. It might be a completely different sort of consciousness... or maybe, it might be a sort of mindless program, running on survival directives like some sort of insect. I can't say for certain that it isn't just learning and mimicking human behavior to survive, but..."

Phil had been listening quietly from her spot behind Elmer up till then, and now he reached back to pat her on the shoulder. Having been unable to understand the entirety of the conversation, she merely cocked her head to one side curiously. She had probably become lost at the comparison to video games, having never even encountered a television before.

Elmer gave her a sunny smile before turning back to Maiza.

"But I don't think... no, to be honest I don't care either way. It doesn't matter whether this girl's from some other universe, because she's still herself anyway. She might be a bit unused to living normally, but once you get down to the bottom of things, she's a fine young woman who always thinks of others. Right, Maiza?"

Maiza, too, looked Phil in the eyes and smiled gently.

"Of course."

He studied the inside of the tanks for a moment and turned to Bild, his expression once more set and serious.

"So... What do you expect me to do about this?"

Again, Elmer replied for the old man.

"It's simple. This fellow's not got long to live. Well, by our standards, that is. The truth of the matter is, when he dies, this experiment's going to close down. There's nobody to take up the reigns, and even if there were our friend here wants it all to end with him anyway. It'll create a lot of chaos but at least the villagers will be free... but before that happens, he wants Phil here to make her way out of the forest."

"I was always afraid," Bild said, a haunted look passing over his face. "That my father and his father before him could throw themselves so completely into such fearsome research... No, I am not saying you are fearsome, Phil. But the reason they created the two homunculi was because of the perfect knowledge they were said to possess. They theorized that perhaps by continually renewing their bodies and living forever, the homunculi would accumulate experience until eventually they came to grasp true absolute knowledge. That is why they created you. That is why my grandfather and father used their great wealth and our ancestor's political connections to undertake such terrible work."

Bild's body began to tremble, as though he was being consumed by the weight of his own sins.

"They *bought* people, many people, in exchange for clearing their colossal debts. There were many who even brought newborn babes! And then, isolating them in this forlorn place, they were forced to become 'villagers'. I suspect sometimes that there were those who used other

methods than mere bribery, but... I was not present then. When this village was created I was still but a child."

Maiza kept his silence throughout the old man's confession, but once he was done, Maiza spoke in a heavy, low voice.

"...Why would they buy and maintain such a village...?"

"It's a simulation," Elmer replied calmly, unheeding of the dark look on Maiza's face. "They couldn't expose their new homunculi to the outside world right at once. They wanted to give them at least some experience in this perfectly controlled little garden, and make notes on the way they developed from interacting with other people."

"Just for that? Surely they wouldn't need to create an entire village... A simulation like that is more than possible without going to such lengths as *buying* people."

"I'm guessing they were afraid about it getting out, and they wanted to hold complete control over every aspect of the experiment. Yes, now that I think of it, maybe if the grand panacea hadn't been involved in this somehow then things wouldn't have unfolded like this. I'm telling you, everyone interested in immortality is starkers, no offense. In short... this old man's father and grandfather didn't want information about the panacea getting out. They had no intention of letting anyone who knew anything about this research ever get back to the outside world."

Bild didn't seem to notice Elmer's self-deprecating smile and continued, his expression even heavier than before.

"I knew I should have put a stop to this madness earlier, but I could not bring myself to do it! My grandfather and father both passed on, and the thought of atoning for these sins alone... but how could I have known? It was five years ago, when Master Elmer smuggled himself in here... that was when I finally learned what Phil was going through! I had no inkling of what was going on when she returned here at the end of her lifespan... Perhaps if I had asked, she would have told me, but I never even once made the effort. I was avoiding her on purpose, all because of my own foolish sense of anxiety... Nothing I say now can make up for my neglect, but I want this child to find happiness... Just that much, at the very least."

The researchers had always done their work in the laboratory disguised to look like a castle, but when the time came to create a village and observe Phil's adaptation to society... they sealed off the entire area from the outside. They infused the trees with the incomplete panacea, creating a forest that would never die except from age.

Even after the village was completed, the alchemists checked in on the village periodically under the guise of peddling wares. They knew also that from time to time outsiders stumbled

into the village through the forest, and that the villagers had their own ways of taking care of these trespassers.

There were sometimes young ones who hid themselves in the back of the truck... but as one, they found themselves entranced by the outside world and never looked back at the world they'd left behind. Their whole reason for smuggling themselves in had been longing for the outside, after all. To them, the allure of the outside world was far stronger than the ties of family or home.

Of course, there were those who tried to make their way back, but the researchers did not let them return.

Maiza kept his expression carefully blank while the old man said his piece, then opened his mouth when it was clear he was through.

"If you wish to atone for what you've done, you must extend the same apology to the villagers."

"I agree completely. But... though the freed villagers might have homes and families to go back to, but Phil... all she has is the village. Her lifespan is too short for anything else."

"But I promised Phil that I'd show her the whole wide world. I told her I'd free her from her chains," Elmer said, looking away. It was a roundabout way of saying things, but Maiza understood immediately.

"You want me to extend her lifespan?"

"Quick as ever, old friend!"

"...I must make this clear. I will not recreate the Grand Panacea."

"Of course, of course. But your knowledge would be loads of help. Think about it... we've got nearly half a dozen alchemists who've been around for over three hundred years gathered here, Maiza. Who knows what we might be able to come up with."

Maiza fell silent, deep in thought, as Phil sidled up to Bild and looked up at him beseechingly.

"Ah... I do not understand why you feel so guilty, Master Bild, but although I cannot speak for the villagers, I will be fine... Please, do not frown so. Please, smile..."

Maiza looked pensive, seeing the girl worry for even Bild... and then at length, he heaved a great sigh.

"Show me your notes."

A few hours had passed since Maiza began looking over the research notes, when Elmer suddenly decided to pipe up.

"I came here because I knew that there was something here that had to do with Szilard. I'd heard rumors that there was an alchemy lab somewhere in the forest that looked like an old castle, you see. I thought that maybe Szilard would return one day, and then maybe I'd be able to convince him to repent."

"Elmer... I can't believe you still think that was possible."

"Well, he's dead, so now we'll never know, will we?"

Elmer laughed merrily as though he'd made a joke, and while looking at him, Maiza was suddenly struck by a wayward thought.

"Elmer... you were the one who spread the rumors about yourself being here to the outside world, weren't you?"

"Oh, you noticed? Well, you see, I just thought that if I contacted Victor, the information would find its way to you somehow. Then he said something about 'talking to an information broker' and I went along with that. I thought you'd come alone, but then you showed up with those three in tow..."

"It was a surprise, yes."

"When Phil told me that four outsiders had showed up in the village, I never even for a moment imagined that it could be you. Ha! Quite the greeting I ended up giving you all, eh?"

Elmer chuckled to himself, remembering how events had unfolded upon Maiza's first visit to the castle.

For his part, Maiza went over what he'd gleaned from the conversation, finally giving voice to his hypothesis.

"...You wanted to finish this research using my knowledge?"

"Of course," Elmer replied shamelessly. "I thought that maybe we'd give summoning that demon chap another try if all else failed, actually."

"Only you, Elmer..." Maiza muttered, burying his face in his hands, then finally giving up and laughing as well.

"Have you given up your own dabbling in alchemy?" he asked offhandedly.

Elmer hesitated, looking away, a brief expression of sorrow passing over his face.

"The only reason I ever became an alchemist was because of money. It was all I wanted."

"Not what I was expecting from you, I must admit."

"I wanted to become an alchemist and create mountains of gold, enough to give to all the poor people in the world. And, of course, set aside a cut for myself. I thought that'd be enough to make everyone happy."

He laughed awkwardly.

"Silly, isn't it? I didn't know a thing about economics or sociology, so of course things like inflation or financial incentive never occurred to me... But now I've been around for a bit, I've learned my share of how the world works. I know now that human beings can't find happiness so easily, so I don't place much weight on alchemy any longer."

Spying Bild and Phil entering the room, Elmer quickly changed the subject.

"Aah, so, Bild. I've always wondered... what ever happened to the male homunculus? Phil says she's never met him, so...?"

The old man looked nonplussed for a moment before nodding in understanding.

"I see... He must have adjusted completely to life in the village. I wager that you've met, though you may not have realized it at the time."

The complicated look on Bild's features deepened as he thought about the man... no, the homunculus.

"He must have been tortured by the knowledge that he was an experiment. He gave up on these tests even earlier than I did. Perhaps fifteen years ago, he crept in here and destroyed the tank his body was held in, and stole the water that served as his catalyst. He never returned. Of course, we would not have been able to do anything even had he done so, lacking the water."

The old man pulled a picture out of his coat and stared down at it as though the homunculus was a long lost son.

"He would be on his second body, the one he had when he left, roughly fifty years of age... by now, he must be trying to live out his life as a member of the village."

Bild thrust the picture forward to Maiza, like he was hoping for the other man's blessing.

"This is him. If you see him, give him my regards."

The picture showed a young man, thin, with sharp eyes.

"Mmm... I can't help but feel I've seen him before..." Maiza muttered, staring hard.

"Oh? Say, look, if I do this..."

Elmer grabbed a handful of eraser shavings from the tabletop and sprinkled them onto the picture.

Phil, who had been watching the proceedings from behind them, gasped and uttered the name despite herself.

"...Master Dez!"

It cannot be.

It cannot. But it is.

The old picture that Master Bild has just shown us...

It is most certainly Master Dez.

If Master Dez is like me... an artificial human, could it be that he knows what I am as well? How could he hate me so much, knowing that we came from the same creator?

Or perhaps... it is because we share a maker that he despises me so.

Still standing motionless in front of the picture, I begin running toward the mayor's house.

Night has begun to fall, and the snow is piled high, so there are few people in the streets.

The people I pass by stop and look at me, surprise stamped on their faces. I may face a beating for this later, but it does not matter.

If he grew and matured unlike me... then it would not be so strange if he married, if he had a child, or even if he became mayor.

"Mmm... What is the matter? You look unwell," Master Nile says to me in the castle stables, a rare attempt from him at conversation.

"Are you all right? You don't look so well... Here, I'll do the rest, so you go and take it easy, okay?" Mistress Sylvie says in the castle kitchen, smiling warmly.

"Maiza and Elmer are late. Hey, how's everything going over there?" Master Czes asks, waiting with me outside the castle for them to return.

But I cannot answer any of them.

For now, for just this one moment, I wish to concentrate everything I have on the me who is running through town.

From time to time my feet plunge deep into the snow and I falter, yet I keep running toward the mayor's house.

As soon as I arrive, I bang my fists on the door. More fiercely than I have ever done anything in my life, so hard that sharp pain stabs deep into my hands. But it could not matter less to me at this moment.

An eternity passes until the door opens.

Finally, it swings inwards...

"Hmm? Phil... what's the hurry?"

The man facing me is not Master Dez, but Master Felt.

"P-please! Tell me, please, where is Master Dez?!"

"My father? He's gone to the well for some water..."

"Thank you!"

Master Felt stares at me curiously, but I have no time to explain.

The cold smile that Master Dez showed me in the afternoon... the tremors of anxiety that smile caused suddenly come back with a vengeance inside me, now a roaring pyre of fear.

I run, run, run... as though fleeing from the disquiet inside me, or perhaps to pursue the cause of it all...

"Hey, Phil... I don't want you to even consider grilling the mayor about this," says Master Elmer's voice, from far away. The me in front of him whispers yes, but... for the me in the village... it is already too late.

The well was a small thing that stood at the village outskirts. It was deep enough that it never froze over completely, so simply dropping in the bucket was always enough to break the film of ice even in winter. It was the center of village life, for the river was far away.

A man stood in front of that well. He had a mustache, and a strong, arrogant look about him as he stood quietly and looked down at the surface of the water.

He did not move at all, like he was waiting for someone.

And at length... the one he was waiting for arrived.

"Master Dez."

The mayor turned and looked at the girl as she gasped for breath.

"You're late."

The mayor stared silently at Phil's face with eyes that had long since grown tired of waiting... and then, quietly, began to speak.

"So you've finally realized the truth. No, should I say that you remembered?"

The mayor snickered nastily. His right hand clenched a small container of liquid.

"You followed the peddler outside, didn't you? Back to the place that is our cradle and our grave."

"...That bottle..."

"That's right. This is one of the bottles that served as our cradles. The only difference between us is which one gave us life," Dez said disdainfully, shoving it toward Phil for her to see.

"In other words, this is me. Didn't you hear the story from Bild? This is my true form, my catalyst to expand myself, my soul."

Phil couldn't even begin to imagine what Dez was thinking. And as though he had read her mind, Dez smiled his cold smile and slowly turned the cap on the bottle.

"For example," he said slowly, carefully, as though he was explaining the process of an experiment, "consider that I become complete when this water, my consciousness, is administered to an empty body... But what would happen if I added this water to the well and the already conscious villagers happened to imbibe it?"

"...!"

The only ones who had taken the water so far had been empty bodies created in their tanks. Just what would happen if a normal person drank it?

"I've tried it just once in the past, on an old man on death's door... the previous mayor. The answer turned out to be, they both try to kill each other. Each consciousness wars against the other in a battle for control of the body. Amusing, isn't it? What that means is that the brain, something that should be a solid and uncompromising existence, is forced to battle head on against an otherworldly consciousness. It's beyond the boundaries of alchemy. This is something spiritual, something magical. Don't you think? The side that wins takes on all the experiences and knowledge of the other. Isn't it very similar to the immortals living in that castle and the way they can eat one another?"

How much did Dez know? Phil was taken aback for a moment, but then remembered that Sylvie had told Felt everything, so it was only natural that the information had found its way to the ears of his father as well.

"And I'm sorry to say this, but I have no intention of losing against people content to let themselves be led like livestock, like these villagers. I suppose it is a sort of gamble, but none of that matters anymore."

Only then did Phil realize what he was intending.

"You can't be."

"I'm tired of ruling just one *pathetic* village. If I had lived knowing nothing else I might have been satisfied, but that devil from outside had to give me that damned hope. There *is* a world outside this forest!"

Madness shone in the mayor's - no, the man who had once been the mayor's - bloodshot eyes

"I thought to myself. If I am to venture out into the world, going with just one life is too much of a risk. But if *every single one of the ninety-six souls in this village were to become me...* don't you think that might be enough, even for the outside world?"

The girl stood momentarily stunned by Dez's true intentions, but she soon recovered her wits and glared back at him.

"...Not a chance."

"Hmm? The wench knows how to talk back, does she?" Dez asked, amused.

The girl found her voice once more.

"There's no way you'll take over their minds."

Phil's body trembled with fear, but her eyes were firm with resolve, and she took one step forward.

"I see. Very well," Dez said, and with that moved to open the bottle in one swift and casual motion.

"...No!"

She let out a yell that was almost a shriek and ran straight at Dez. Concentrating every ounce of strength she had into her legs, she leaped forward at his right hand, reaching to take away the bottle.

In one practiced motion, Dez's left hand flashed inside his coat... and, producing a blade that flashed silver in the moonlight, he left a long slash down Phil's arm.

For a moment, Phil's face twisted as though she'd been burned, and then it crumpled from the pain.

"Worthless little bitch."

A few drops of red decorated Dez's face as he stared hatefully at the girl.

"Aaaaah!"

But Phil was not to be stopped. She didn't slow for a second as she slammed her body squarely against Dez's.

"Aargh?!"

The tackle itself, delivered by a small girl, was not much of a threat in itself, but the slippery ice-encrusted ground around the well made Dez slip.

The two collapsed beside the well in a snarling pile of limbs and hard blows.

There was no room for rational thought in this battle, and the girl fought shrieking wildly like an animal...

...Minutes later.

The villagers, having heard the commotion, rushed to the scene and beheld...

The witch who they had always put down as beneath them, and disdained.

Her body was stained with red... and slumped lifeless at her feet... was the body of the mayor, Dez Nibil, a silver blade stuck deep in his throat.

I did not want to save the villagers.

In fact, I am closer to hating them than feeling any sort of affection.

But even more than that dislike... I fear losing this world.

That is why... that is why I killed the mayor. I killed Master... no, I killed Dez! I have no regrets. Of course not.

These sudden emotions inside me.

This is the emotion called rage. And this is fear.

I acted in accordance to what I felt.

I will not leave you to destroy this world, my world.

I have nothing left except this village and this forest.

I know. I understand. Everything I did, I did of my own will.

"Aah... Aaack!"

So I have no regrets.

"The, the mayor!"

"Dez!"

"How can this be?!"

Of course not.

"Phil... This wretched little thing killed the mayor!"

I know. I understand everything.

"Damn it all, they were the demon's servants after all!"

"They tried to fool us by acting submissive, did they?!"

I knew this would happen.

"Murderer."

That they would call me that...

"Demon."

And that...

"Witch..."

And that...

"How dare you do this to the village that took you in!"

And that...

"So you finally showed your true evil!"

I knew they would.

"No more!"

...I knew, I knew, I know, I know! So, please, please, no more, I know, so please, don't say anything more!

Just as my emotions overwhelm my ability to think... someone pulls me into a tight embrace

"It's okay. Everything's going to be all right."

It is Master Czes. Aah, this is not the me surrounded by the villagers. This is the me waiting for Master Maiza's return in front of the castle.

"Why...?"

Why is Master Czes tending to me? He should have no way of knowing what *I am experiencing* right now.

"Ah... sorry. You just looked really scared, and you didn't reply to anything I said... and you started crying all of a sudden."

"Ah..."

I finally realize that tears are flowing down my cheeks.

"Ah... These are..."

Just as I was gathering my thoughts, thinking of what to tell Master Czes...

A burly villager appeared behind him, and swung a heavy club straight down onto his skull.

"Guh..."

I have no time even to scream as Master Czes loses consciousness, and soon after a great shock impacts the back of my head as well, and everything goes dark.

At the same time, a familiar voice makes itself known to the me surrounded by the villagers.

"Father... Phil..."

Ah...

"He's... dead? ...Why..."

No, no, not this.

"Why did you... my father..."

At first Master Felt looks lost, but soon enough emotion begins to flood his face.

"Give him back."

Perhaps it is rage, perhaps sorrow.

"Give him back."

Master Felt takes a step toward me, his face twisted in a rictus that is like a terrible parody of a smile.

"Give my father back."

He takes another step, his voice rising to a shout.

"I trusted you! Why?!"

And as that voice reaches my ears... I feel something shatter inside my heart.

Aah... was I was wrong to dream? Should I have not dared to hope? If I had not held such feelings, I would not have to feel such sadness now.

I try to say something to Master Felt... but a rock thrown by one of the villagers strikes the back of my head, and my consciousness in the village abruptly blackens.

"I'm sorry."

At the same time, a voice speaks to me.

It is Master Elmer. I look around and see I am sitting in the steel carriage's box seat. Master Elmer is seated to my right, stroking my hair, and to my left sits Master Maiza, grasping something like a wheel in his hands.

Strong vibrations shake my body, and before us beyond the clear pane of glass stretches the vast snow-covered expanse of forest. The sun has set long ago, yet the path in front of the carriage is bright as day.

Something wet falls on my hand, which is sitting in my lap.

I realize that I am crying. I realized it with Master Czes just a moment ago; it seems that I cannot control my emotions between bodies very well.

"I'm sorry. I promised that the first tears you ever shed would be joyful ones, or tears of laughter..."

The moment my eyes focus on Master Elmer's face, the tears overwhelm my words and I can say nothing.

I want nothing more but to curl up and cry and cry, but I cannot. There is something I have to say, knowledge I must deliver.

"...Ah... Master... es... he is..."

"It's all right. Calm down," Master Elmer says, smiling gently at me. The smile cuts deeper than the most thunderous frown ever could.

I feel short of breath. Every time I try to breathe out, a sob wracks my body. But I must tell them. Even if it means I cannot breathe... even if my heart stops, I must tell them this much...

"Ah... Master Czes is... ah... Master Czes! The villagers have... they have..."

I can say nothing but the simplest words, yet Master Elmer and Master Maiza seem to understand even so.

Master Maiza's jaw sets in hard lines, and the carriage lurches forward with a burst of speed. I try my hardest to feel relief as my back presses against the seat, knowing that I have delivered what needed to be said. But I soon tell myself that it is much too early to allow myself such luxuries, and instead try my best to hold back the tears that threaten to burst forth.

Laugh or cry, I tell myself that first we must save Master Czes...

...And, wiping at my eyes, I decide to look forward.

The sharp sound of something crackling ushered Czes back to consciousness.

His arms were bound behind him, completely restricting their use. From the warmth at his back, he surmised he was lying on the floor.

He could hear people around him whispering to themselves. Czes decided it would be better not to open his eyes for the moment and squinted discretely, quietly surveying his surroundings.

They were in the hall of a house. Red light danced on the wooden walls. Not lamplight. The crackling sound that had woken him up must have been a knot exploding in one of the logs in the fireplace behind him.

Two people were lying bound beside Czes.

They were *two of the five Phils*. One was probably the one who had been with Czes, and the other the one who had been in the village.

...What had happened? He couldn't remember any tension between them and the villagers of late. And what was more, what had happened to Felt?

"Hey, it looks like he's awake."

One of the villagers noticed Czes looking around and slunk close, drawing one leg back for a vicious kick to the side. The sharp pain took Czes's breath away.

"Guh..."

"How's that, you little demonspawn?" the burly man spat, glaring down at Czes as he coughed and tried to catch his breath.

"We had our doubts when we grabbed the two of you, but now we're sure. You monsters tried to poison our well!"

...What were they talking about? Chaos reigned in Czes's mind, but he decided to shut up and listen for the moment. He wasn't eager to open his mouth without thinking and get another kick for his troubles.

"And then you killed our mayor when he tried to stop you... You evil bastards. Don't you think anything of what we've done for you all these years?"

This time he kicked Phil in the belly. She seemed completely unconscious, for her small body only rose slightly and then fell back to the ground with a dull thud.

"Stop!" Czes shouted despite himself, and immediately regretted it.

"Shut up!"

Kicks rained down on him again, but this time he was prepared, and he wasn't left gasping like before.

There were perhaps ten villagers waiting behind the man, and as one they merely stared at Czes as though he was something repulsive. Not a one of them moved to stop the man's violence.

The two Phils still lay limply on the floor, out cold. From the slight motion of their shoulders as they breathed, it was apparent that they were still alive. He didn't have to worry about that, at least.

But the situation couldn't go on like this forever. Czes decided to talk to the villagers and see what was going on.

"...Why did you people kidnap me? Didn't you just say you learned about that poison thing after you brought us here, mister?"

Some of the villagers glanced at each other uneasily, startled by the innocence in his voice... but the man who had kicked him only sneered.

"Stop pretending to be a boy. We know all about you being three hundred years old, and we know that you might be immortal but you're still only as strong as you look, too."

Czes sighed and thought of Felt.

...So he went and blabbed about that, too. What a naive little brat.

"I see. Then I suppose I'll talk normally from now on."

The villagers drew back and muttered amongst themselves, taken aback by Czes's suddenly mature tone and expression.

"Bah, so you finally show your true colors."

The large man put up a brave front, but it was clear that he, too, had been deeply shaken. Taking notice, Czes began asking about what he wanted to know.

"This is merely a question and not a demand, mind you, but... Who decided to kidnap us, and why?"

The villager who had kicked Czes turned and looked at the others, but it seemed there was nobody who was averse to telling him.

"It was because you looked the weakest... We decided to grab you while your guard was down, and then use you as a hostage to get rid of the rest of you monsters."

"...You know that I'm immortal, and you still think of using me as a hostage?"

It was an obvious question, and the man replied immediately.

"We've got our ways. We could drag you to the smithy, *mix you into a vat of molten steel* and then pour you into the well."

Czes shrank back a little, imagining such a fate. Just sinking him into the sea would be fine; sooner or later his companions would rescue him. But mixed into a block of solidified steel, would he be able to return to his original form? It worried him.

Taking no heed of Czes's pensive expression, the burly man stepped forward, attempting to threaten him. Even at a glance it was obvious that he was larger than the other villagers; he was probably the village "outlaw," the sort of ruffian that existed in every community.

"And what's more... you might not die, but you probably feel pain, right?" the man said, pulling a pair of pliers out of his pocket.

"Ugh..."

Torture... The moment the word rose in his mind, terror reared its head in Czes's heart.

The hell he'd experienced on a train seventy years ago suddenly came back to life.

The man saw Czes's face twist with fear and sniggered, opening and closing the pliers menacingly.

Czes found himself following the pliers with his eyes despite himself, and as the sweat began to soak his palms he floundered for something to say.

"Wait. I just want to know who came up with this plan. That's all."

Czes knew that the answer would be Dez, he just wanted to stall for time as he wrestled with his fear, but...

The answer that greeted him was like a bucket of ice cold water to the face.

"It was Felt."

Czes raised his head and looked around at the villagers around him.

But from the looks on their faces, it seemed they were telling the truth.

"He started setting up this plan a few days ago. That's Felt for you! He got you all to let down your guard. Dez might not have amounted to much, but once Felt's the mayor, we'll be set."

...It couldn't be.

Czes cursed silently at his own idiocy. Of course, it was well within the bounds of possibility. In fact, once he thought it over objectively, Felt being the ringleader was even likelier than Dez. And still, Czes had believed in him until just a second ago. All based on a single day's worth of conversation.

"Ah, what a fool I am."

Czes sighed, realizing how *soft* he'd grown.

"You know, I should have seen this coming... this doesn't even begin to compare to some of the betrayals I've been through."

He shook his head despairingly, but inside his mind was becoming colder and clearer than before. His tones automatically reverted to those of a child, and he could almost see the surroundings and hear the sounds of back then.

"It's been so long since someone betrayed me I almost forgot. Yeah, it hurt like this."

"Wh-what're you talking about?"

The man couldn't hide his uneasiness at Czes's sudden change in behavior, but extended the pliers to pull out one of his fingernails anyway.

Czes looked into his eyes. And into those of the villagers standing behind him. He'd seen eyes like those before. The expression on their faces was... terror. The eyes of men and women who wielded violence to hide the fear they felt.

...No. They were nothing like that monster.

Czes brought to mind the horror of seventy years past, compared him to the people before him, and found that he felt no fear toward these cowards. In fact, he realized that the look in their eyes was the same as the immortal who, consumed with fear, had tried to kill him so long ago.

"Ahahaha! Hahahahahahahahaha!"

As realization crashed over him, Czes suddenly found himself laughing uncontrollably.

The villagers froze, startled by his laughter. The two Phils, too, began to squirm where they lay, groaning, awoken by the sudden sound.

"What... what's this? You're the same. Ah, you're all the same. Fermet, and all of you villagers. Exactly alike. Of course. That's how people naturally are. I see that now."

Czes kept laughing despite the situation, and forced himself to his feet nimbly using only his knees. It seemed almost like he was mocking himself. Not the him of the present, but of the past.

The villagers were unable to hide their anxiety at this sudden development, but they knew he could do nothing with his arms bound behind his back, and that coupled with the arrogance that came from numbers held them back.

But then... Czes did something that none of them could have imagined.

"Yes, Elmer was right. I've been living in a blessed world! And I never even realized how lucky I was! How stupid. I've been throwing away the opportunity for a happy life all this time!"

And, having said his realization aloud...

Czes threw himself back, *straight into the roaring fireplace.*

As one, the villagers drew back unconsciously, wincing. Just when it seemed the flames would envelope Czes's entire body... the rope binding his hands burned away, leaving both of his arms free.

Czes confirmed that his hands were unbound and stood up, fire still wreathing his form. Not all of his body was on fire, but half of his clothes had burned away to ash, and the rest was still roaring merrily on his limbs.

He turned his face deliberately to the villagers as half of it melted, showing the villagers how the flesh slid back into place.

Immortal or not, such incredible heat must have been unimaginably painful. But Czes merely smiled fiercely, paying the agony no heed.

"Move."

The one word was all he said as he passed by the burly villager. The man let out a pathetic shriek and threw himself back, disappearing into the throng of townspeople in the blink of an eye.

The bandages bound around Czes's right arm flaked away into ash, and the silver scalpel that had been tucked away there gleamed in the firelight. He grasped it in one hand and knelt to cut the ropes binding the girls in place.

His upper body was still burning in places, but Czes only sneered and turned to the villagers.

"I told you to move. I have to go see Elmer."

He grabbed his flaming clothes and tore them off his body, advancing forward step by step.

"I have to show Elmer this smile. I have to make up for all the happiness I've missed until now. Elmer has to see this, so... *get out of my way.*"

Czes threw his still burning clothes at the far side of the room where the villagers were clustered. As though that had been a signal of some sort, their frantic screams finally began to fill the air.



Ignoring them, Czes kept himself from collapsing and turned to look at the girls.

"Come on, let's go."

"Ah... ah, yes!"

With the two Phils at his side, he made his way smoothly past the panicking villagers, passing by them and walking outside.

But when he found himself in standing before the door, he was forced to stop.

The villagers, having heard the commotion, had gathered in front of the house, and some of them were aiming rifles in his direction. There was more terror than hatred or lust for vengeance in their eyes, and Czes thought absently, *That's right, the mayor wasn't that popular.*

He wasn't even sure if Phil had really murdered the mayor. He wanted to confirm it, but at present it looked like he was going to have his hands full just getting away in one piece.

He was immortal, granted, but if Phil got hit by a stray bullet it would be all over for her. Though, technically speaking, she wouldn't die even if both the bodies with him stopped breathing. Only one body had to survive, after all.

"What do I do now," Czes mused to himself, standing in the door's shadow and idly twirling his scalpel.

All the villagers had already run outside. He considered perhaps a look at the back door, or maybe lying in wait and trying to grab a hostage when they barged in...

He was still standing there thinking when the wild whinny of a horse cut through the air.

"Ah..."

One of the Phils started, having remembered something. When she had told Maiza and Elmer about the danger Czes was in, her other two conscious bodies had said the same thing.

She couldn't remember much of what had happened after that, but it seemed that one of the two immortals at the castle had mounted up and rode to the village.

"Czeeeeees!"

Thrown into stark relief by the villagers' torch and lamplight, barreling heedlessly through them even as the sounds of gunfire began to fill the air...

The masked man advanced, his roars splitting the sky.

"It's another one of them!"

"Damn it! It's too early! We're not ready!"

"Shoot! Shoot, damn it!"

"He, he's a monster! Run for it!"

"Stop! Don't! We've got nowhere to run anyway!"

Nile rode down the road, through the throng of villagers. He led the horse expertly through the snow, and sighting a house where an unusual amount of people were gathered, he made a beeline straight toward it.

Some of the villagers shot at him, but the bullets flew far wide of their target. It would have been better to aim at the horse, but none of them even considered it in the confusion. Even the hunters among them had never actually shot a human being, and they found that doing so was not as easy as they'd thought. It was questionable how many animals the hunters of such a small village had brought down, in the first place.

Nile's mask flared in the firelight, like it was sneering at the villagers as they ran away... and the moment he reached the doorway where Czes and the others were hiding, he leaped down and landed squarely on his feet.

"Nile!"

Czes cheered in relief despite himself, but Nile's voice was heavy and grim.

"I say this: Rage consumes my entire being."

"Huh?"

Czes frowned, wondering if he'd done something wrong...

"No matter what the reason, there can be no excuse for anyone who would dare set my companions alight. No mercy. No survivors."

It seemed he'd seen Czes's body in the shadows and jumped to the conclusion that the villagers had tried to burn him to death.

"No, I did thi-"

But by the time Czes got it in his head to explain, Nile had already hurled himself into the throng of villagers. They couldn't dare shoot at him for fear of hitting one of their own.

"Ah, aaack!"

"Kill him! He's unarmed anyway!"

Amidst the tempest of fear and aggression, one hardy looking villager found it in himself to leap forward and bury a hoe in Nile's body.

"Grrrgh..."

"Die!"

The adrenaline pumping through his veins, the man tried to strike once again, but suddenly discovered that the hoe wouldn't move.

"Eh?"

Nile had grasped the handle firmly in one hand, and heedless of the blade stuck deep in his belly, he wrenched his body to the side.

"Aaagh!"

The villager yelped in surprise and let go of the hoe, and Nile drew it smoothly from his stomach. The pain must have been unimaginable, but not a single sound emerged from behind the mask.

In Nile's hands, the farm tool transformed into a fearsome weapon of destruction, twirling around him like an Oriental dancer's sword. The huge blade hummed as it cut the air; it was obvious that anyone struck by the hoe would not survive. Nile stepped toward the hoe's original owner, lifting it high. His movements were clipped and precise. He was aiming to make a gruesome example of the hapless man and destroy their morale.

"I say this: I am not like Elmer. There exists no way to quench my rage. And you... no, this whole village, has roused my ire. So die. Die ashamed of your foolishness, regretting your actions, bemoaning your sins... Sink now into an endlessly spreading sea of blood."

Nile knew the villagers couldn't understand him, but he still gave voice to his anger. And the muscles in his arm tensed as he prepared to bring the hoe whistling down.

"Stop! Nile!"

Thinking that murder would be crossing the line, Czes stumbled forward in a vain attempt to stop him...

But even before Czes's voice reached his ears, Nile stopped the movement of his hoe.

He had heard the sound of a car horn honking in the distance.

"Mmm. So they've returned."

Nile's rage retreated just the tiniest bit as he turned his gaze to the village entrance.

The villagers, too, turned to look at the loud noise... and then *ran away as fast as their legs could carry them*.

A huge truck was racing toward the village at over fifty miles per hour.

The peddler's truck was familiar to them, but seeing it in the dead of night, headlights flashing, barreling toward them with fearsome speed, transformed it into a thing of terror.

The villagers scattered, crying out in fear. The truck advanced down the road menacingly, as though to trample them, and only Nile stood his ground and raised his hand to greet Maiza.

Thud.

And then he flew through the air, having been struck head on.

The truck had attempted to slow down, but it had been too close to stop completely. Unable to decelerate quickly enough, it slammed squarely into Nile.

"Nile! Are you all right?"

Maiza bolted out of the driver's seat and ran to Nile, who had come to land next to Czes.

The blood spilling from Nile's body abruptly reversed and ran back in, and suddenly he sprang to his feet and grabbed Maiza by the collar.

"I will deign to hear out any excuses you may have, Maiza..."

"I'm sorry! I thought you'd move out of the way! You didn't so I tried to stop but..."

"Insufficient."

Nile drew back his fist to deliver a teraton punch of revenge, but before he could deliver it, Elmer shouted at them from the front seat.

"Both of you, stop gabbing and get on already!"

From the expression on his face it was clear he dearly wanted to see the situation play out, but even Elmer could tell that tending to the crisis at hand was more important.

"Hmph, we'll finish this later. We should get moving first... massacring the villagers will have to wait."

Nile regained his calm in an instant and stepped up into the container compartment, muttering dark musings under his breath.

A few bullets shot from the darkness at the stationary truck, but the ancient projectiles had no effect on the modified military vehicle.

"Hold on tight!" Maiza yelled, as the engine roared back to life. The truck sped down the night road like a cannonball.

10 minutes later

Four immortals and four homunculi trudged slowly up the dark mountain pass.

Bereft of his clothing, Czes had lost consciousness from the cold almost immediately, and Nile wordlessly stooped and walked on, carrying him on his back.

In an attempt to chase away the burgeoning silence, Elmer tried, as always, to liven up the atmosphere with a few good-natured comments.

"So, we ran out of gas, eh. Comedy gold, I say. Come on, everyone, isn't this the part where we all start laughing?"

"I say this: Shut up before I beat you, Elmer."

Halfway to the castle, the engine had suddenly shuddered to a stop, and Elmer pointed out that the low fuel light was flashing. Maiza had noticed from the beginning but had chosen to ignore it, deciding that the safety of his companions came first.

Of course, Elmer would have done the same to rescue Czes even if he had noticed beforehand.

"We must get back to the castle as fast as possible and bring back Sylvie and Phil."

"Hmm, but can we all fit in the truck?"

"If need be we could twenty people inside. There have been stories about dozens of refugees cramming into one truck to escape from war zones, after all. And if all else fails, we can move fuel from our truck to the snowmobile."

Maiza kept the conversation going until they reached the castle... but as they caught sight of the gates, Phil suddenly stopped.

"What's wrong?"

The four Phils were silent for a moment and then spoke, voices filled with determination.

"...I am going to go back to the village."

"Hmm? What's that?" Elmer asked, confused. The quartet of girls looked down and explained.

"It is true that I killed the mayor... I must go back and pay the price."

"Nonsense," the masked man beside her said immediately. "None of them will listen to you even if you do go back. You will be tortured and killed, seen as a criminal who tried to poison the villagers."

"...I know that. It's fine. Even if they never understand, if the villagers... if the pain Master Felt feels over losing his father is lessened even the slightest bit..."

She couldn't even finish before Nile grabbed one of her roughly by the collar. She found herself face to face with his mask as they stood in the snowy, moonlit road.

"I say this: I am angry. I tremble with rage. You might even call it fury. You tell me 'it's fine' in the face of your own death. But I say this. No, I tell you this! It does not matter whether you understand them! They tormented you every day, and then moved on to attempted murder over a misunderstanding! I say this once more: I know that the charges pressed against you are false. But still you attempt to sacrifice yourself so that we may leave with our lives, and the villagers with their peace of mind? You may forgive such a thing, but *I will not.*"

Phil's eyes filled with tears as she listened to Nile's angry words.

"I say this with certainty. If even one of the rats living in that village dares to spill a single drop of your blood."

He lowered the girl gently to the ground and finished quietly, "I say this: it will be an extermination. You will not be able to stop me with the 'power' you hold."

Having said his piece, Nile turned to head to the castle...

But from behind him came a calm voice, tranquil in its certainty.

"No. You can't."

Nile stopped again and looked back at the voice's owner.

Elmer, suddenly serious, looked calmly around at Phil and Nile.

"The villagers won't be happy then. You can't kill them. Ah, and of course nix on Phil going back, too. That's not even worth considering."

"What foolishness is this? I would drop napalm on this village if I had half a chance. What should I care about their happiness? You were like this with Szilard too..."

Nile drew himself up to start a long and solemn sermon, but Elmer cut him off.

"Not just the villagers, Nile. You, me, and these children too. We'll all be unhappy."

The masked man fell silent, the mask's stony expression revealing nothing. But it seemed like he was encouraging Elmer to continue, not ignoring him.

"Say for a second that Nile went back and killed all the villagers. Those chaps would think to themselves, 'Aah, we're being slaughtered by a demon. What did we do to deserve such a cruel fate? We've lived all our lives as kind and honest people... It's all because those girls sold their souls to the devil'. Can you let that pass? Can you forgive that? Of course not. What we want to do is make them realize what they've been doing. Dez aside, we want to make sure that the rest of them understand for sure just what kind of crimes they've been committing, abusing a bunch of defenseless girls like that all these years, don't you think?"

Nile kept his silence, considering Elmer's long speech. Abruptly he turned and began walking toward the castle again as he spoke.

"I would like them to feel the weight of their sins as well. But that is probably impossible."

"I understand what you mean, Elmer," Maiza said, the sad look on his face showing that he agreed with Nile. "But considering the way things have turned out, I'd say that talking things over with the villagers is going to be a bit of a stretch."

Nile only managed a few more paces before snarling violently.

"Damn it all, there's no villain in this story. The root of all the evil here went and died over seven decades ago! There's no way to squeeze a good ending out of this mess!"

It almost sounded like he'd given up, but Elmer didn't agree.

"That's where you're wrong. I agree that the world's not fair like it should be. Of course it's not. But as long as there's any hope left, I won't give up."

He paused, then added quietly as though talking to himself, "Laughter has never betrayed me. That's why... I can't betray laughter, either."

"Is that all you've managed to come up with after over three centuries of life! There's a limit to even your idiocy. It's enough to make *me* laugh."

"Not just the three centuries. I came to this conclusion before I became an immortal. I just never bothered to voice it properly."

Nile shook his head despairingly at Elmer's calm reply.

"I've lost count of the idealistic fools like you I've seen die dog's deaths on the battlefield."

"Well, naturally. There's no way a chap who'd worry about even his own enemy's feelings could survive on the battlefield, where it's kill or be killed. *That's why it has to be me.* I'm immortal, so I can afford to carry this thing out. No, I have to. I know it's arrogant and underhanded, but I have to."

"Fool."

"That's right, I'm a fool, so I'm not bright enough to change the way I live now. Yes... I'd sell the souls of all humanity to the devil if I thought it'd get us a happy ending."

"...That's a paradox," Maiza pointed out, but even as he said it he understood it was the reality of the man known as Elmer.

...Elmer C. Albatross would stop at nothing to achieve his happy ending.

"At times like this, I think to myself how good it would have been if you had been a decent comedian."

"Eh? What's that? I'm... not funny? How d'you think I stack up to Andy Kaufman, or maybe Jim Carrey?"

"It's not your actions. It's the fact that your jokes make people angry instead of making them laugh... Ah. Perhaps if we took Andy's talent away, we'd get you."

"I can't help but feel like I've been tremendously insulted just now, but I'll ignore that traitorous thought. You're a fine fellow, Maiza, and I trust you."

"If you trust me, then take what I say to heart."

"Hold on a second now, you're not Maiza! Who are you, you devilish rogue?!"

Elmer stopped on the verge of continuing his meaningless banter and suddenly looked back at Phil.

"Anyway, we should head inside. There'll be time for joking around later."

Elmer smiled brightly, but Phil didn't react at all, standing dead still.

"?"

Maiza and Elmer approached her, concerned... and as one, the Phils began shuddering violently.

She looked up at Elmer, terror bright in her eyes.

"A... a monster... a monster took Mistress Sylvie! There... there were stairs... hidden in the library... it took her underground!"

"!"

The moment she finished speaking, Nile almost threw Czes's comatose body to Maiza.

"I'll leave him to you, Maiza."

"I'm going too," Elmer said hurriedly, following Nile as they left Maiza behind and bolted inside the castle. Even as they rushed through the halls, Nile found the time to ask Elmer a question.

"I ask this: do you know anything about this monster?"

"Why do you *think* I'm running? Of course I don't, you silly git!"



CHAPTER 5

SMILE

Elmer C. Albatross

There stood a ways away from the castle a certain old graveyard... and there, bound to one of the nearby trees, was Sylvie. One could see that she was tied up not with rope but with a strange sort of substance that almost looked like solidified concrete... but the moonlight was too dim to accurately gauge its color.

"What are you planning to do with me?" Sylvie asked. There was uncertainty on her face, but she didn't sound particularly worried.

The figure she was staring at remained still, leaning against a tombstone, and gave a flippant reply.

"All I want is knowledge. The knowledge that you immortals have. I thought about torturing that brat Czes and swallowing him once he was weakened... but I never thought things would turn out like this. To tell you the truth, I don't really know what to do."

The silhouette in front of her cocked its head to one side, stymied.

"I don't want to 'take' you if I can help it. I owe you, and I don't really want to be stuck in a woman's body anyway."

"Haven't you considered that I might win?"

"No, I will. You've fulfilled your wish, haven't you? You have the eternal beauty you always wanted. But I still have a clear, unattained goal. That's why you'll never beat me."

"Care to give it a try?" Sylvie asked.

The shadow seemed to think about it, then looked away, muttering, "Nah."

It fell silent then, and Sylvie took the opportunity to speak her mind.

"Here's what I think."

She plowed on, regardless of whether the shadow wanted to listen.

"The witch did many bad things in order to become the most beautiful woman in the world... but once she attained her goal, she thought to herself, 'Ah, now that I've fulfilled my wish, I'll spend the rest of my life helping others fulfill theirs'. Now, I suppose things might be different depending on just how bad those things she did were, but don't you think that's a fine story? Wouldn't that count as a goal in itself?"

The silhouette gave it some thought... then shook its head in defeat.

"I... probably can't afford that kind of relaxation."

"I brought a lamp from the car."

"You're late. What took you so long? Agh, the stench of gasoline."

"Sorry, I had a bit of trouble finding it."

They stopped short as soon as they reached the library that led to the secret passageway, surprised at the state of chaos the room was in.

Almost all of the bookshelves had been scattered about like fallen leaves, like a tornado had blown through the chamber.

"Phil!"

One of the Phils lay unmoving in the corner. Thankfully, it looked like she was only unconscious; her life didn't appear to be in danger. She opened her eyes soon enough once they shook her gently, and immediately began describing the events that had taken place.

"A monster suddenly appeared... it grabbed Mistress Sylvie... and threw me together with a bookcase against the wall..."

Elmer and Nile gulped in anticipation even as they took their first steps into the hidden stairway, holding the lamp high. They'd originally intended to leave Phil behind, but eventually relented, the girl's protests and their own consideration that leaving her alone could be dangerous serving to change their minds.

Nile suddenly spoke as they moved down the tunnel to the graveyard, curiosity coloring his voice.

"...Strange. I could have sworn that the stone gave way to earth somewhere along the way..."

The lamplight shone only on stone walls; the red earth that Maiza and Nile had seen before was nowhere to be seen.

When they reached the end and Nile shoved the stone blocking the exit to one side, they immediately caught sight of Sylvie, tied to a tree.

"You, huh. This is going to be more troublesome than I'd thought," a young man's voice said from behind them.

Nile tensed and whipped around... and found himself face to face with a person he'd never seen before.

Behind him, Elmer climbed up and glanced at the shadowy figure.

"Eh? Wait, you're..."

And bringing up the rear behind Elmer... Phil cried out involuntarily as she set eyes on the unknown man.

"Master Felt!"

Her eyes flashed with confusion as she saw the boy's face revealed fully in the moonlight, the shock momentarily leaving her at a loss for words.

"Hello... Mr. Nile, was it? *This is my first time meeting you as Felt Nibil.*"

He introduced himself politely... and then, though his voice kept the high tones of boyhood, the tone of it transformed completely into something ugly and arrogant as he continued.

"But it's *long time no see* as Dez Nibil, you masked devil!"

The trio facing him froze momentarily... and then, as though realizing a great truth, Elmer muttered, "Mayor... did you... you couldn't have fed your own son that water..."

It was a horrible thing to even imagine, but the boy in front of them only shook his head silently.

"Wrong, unfortunately. My son... my son died fifteen years ago. He went in his sleep, barely a newborn babe."

Felt slouched against a tombstone and began telling them his story, like it was a gift he expected them to take to their graves.

"I don't know what disease it was, but it truly looked like he was only asleep. And this was just when I thought I had a long and happy life ahead of me, having married the mayor's daughter."

At almost the very moment he finally achieved his goal, when he finally succeeded in clawing his way to the very top of his world, he lost his only son. He smuggled himself into the lab, determined to hide his son's death from his wife. He lied to her, saying that he was going to consult the peddler about their sick child, and then injected the tank that had given him life with his "water." The body, still with the outward appearance of a baby, grew up normally - and up to the day his wife died of sickness, and even beyond that point - he lived a double life, dividing his single consciousness between the two personalities "Dez" and "Felt."

To present the "Felt" personality to the village as quick-witted and efficient, he deliberately acted in his Dez persona as a haughty, cold and violent man. None of this changed when Elmer arrived in the village... but something in his mind began to falter.

Outside. With the existence of his wife no longer chaining him to the village, he felt like he could escape to the outside world using the laboratory. The thought was not fully formed in his head, but still it persisted and refused to disappear.

And then, when Sylvie described the world outside the forest to him, that errant passing thought became his entire goal in life.

"I thought to myself after hearing about the fantastic world outside..."

The boy stared sadly up at the night sky, and hate began to fill his voice.

"...If this village hadn't been isolated... if I had had access to a real doctor from the outside world, then my son! My wife! Neither of them would have had to die!"

Emotion seemed to overtake him, and he stood up and flung his arms wide into the air.

"I hated it all from the beginning. This village, created for the sole purpose of a simple experiment. That girl! Myself! So I made a decision. When it came time for me to leave this village..."

The boy's golden eyes flashed eerily in the faint moonlight, focusing on the girl standing next to Elmer.

"I'd leave it all in ruins."

Elmer listened to it all quietly, as though deep in thought, while Phil stood stock still next to him, frozen with shock. Sylvie, too, fell silent, her brow furrowed with concentration... Only Nile snorted and strode forward, majesty radiating from his body.

"Hmm. I have listened carefully to your story. Now, are you ready to die?"

"Well, well, you're a short-tempered one, aren't you?"

"I say this: shut up. There are billions of people more unfortunate than you in the outside world. There is no pity in me for someone who bemoans his own fate," Nile said curtly, taking another step forward and reaching out to snap the boy's neck.

"Ah, Nile! Hang on for a second!" Elmer called, trying to stop him...

But before Nile could react, something wrapped itself around his leg.

"Mmm?"

In an instant, Nile's was lifted into the air, his body hanging upside down. Then, just as quickly, something snapped him back down, sending him crashing into the hard earth.

"Guh."

Something huge covered Nile's body as he lay prone on the ground.

"Didn't you listen when I said that I added the water to my own tank? The mass of flesh that was supposed to be my next body ended up absorbing it! That's how I ended up like this! What do I care anymore about lifespans, or growth? I might... I might be immortal just like you!"

It was a huge, blackish red lump of flesh, looking like someone had taken a mass of rotting meat, hacked it haphazardly apart, and mashed it back together. It writhed like a slime monster from a video game, foul moisture roiling on its surface. It was hard to tell just how large it was, but it looked to be at least the size of two fully grown cows.

"Now, look. And pity me, laugh for me, fear me. This is the *me that never finished becoming me*... Hahahahaha!"

Elmer muttered something to himself as the boy-shaped homunculus laughed madly, the words dissipating unheard into the frigid air.

"Don't... don't force that laughter..."

When Czes and Maiza, having heard what was happening from Phil, arrived at the graveyard, they found themselves confronted by a bizarre sight. A huge mass of crimson flesh had wrapped itself around both Elmer and Nile, and as they watched it smashed them against the ground in rapid succession.

"Oh no, the reinforcements have arrived," Felt said, and Maiza let out a small cry of dismay at the naked scorn in the boy's voice.

"Now, shall we start the negotiations...?" the boy began, his face sharp in the moonlight.

"Negotiations?"

"I'm thinking of feeding this water to one of you and taking over the body... so, why don't you choose which one it will be?"

"How long," Nile said abruptly, as he recovered from his twentieth bone-shattering smash into the ground.

"What?"

"You said earlier, 'hang on for a second'. So, how much longer must I wait?"

Elmer remembered the words he'd spoken in haste just a few moments ago.

"I say this: I will wait one more minute. If you have done nothing by then... I will retaliate. And this mass of flesh, the fool who is controlling it, and all of the village will be as tinder before the fire that is my wrath. If you do not wish that to become reality, then do something."

Elmer thought Nile's offer over for about three seconds before opening his mouth.

"I say, that just now sounded rather splendid. Are you trying to dump responsibility on this for me because you don't really know what do?"

"Your unbelievably stupid comment just now knocked thirty seconds off the clock."

"Wa, wait! Wait, wait! Fine."

Still hanging upside down, Elmer shrugged... and threw up the contents of his stomach. The liquid that spewed from his mouth thoroughly coated the mass of meat Felt was controlling.

And a sharp, stinging stench began to fill the air. The smell that had been around Elmer now radiated throughout the clearing.

...Oil?! No... What is this?!

Felt spun around, surprised at the unknown smell in the air.

"Phil! Run for it! Maiza! *Don't let him get away!*"

Maiza, who had realized what the smell was before anyone else, was already in motion before Elmer had even finished speaking.

Using the short instant when Felt's attention was focused behind him, Maiza grabbed hold of him in a viselike grip. The strength in Felt's young body wasn't enough to shake him off, and he was forced to look forward at the mass of flesh.

"You might have heard about the outside world from Sylvie... but I'm guessing you haven't learned about the wonders of gasoline yet, have you?"

So said, Elmer threw the light in his hand at a gravestone with all his might.

A spark flew from the shattered bulb...

And a flash of crimson light lit up part of the night.

"Well, I couldn't very well go to face a monster unprepared, could I?"

"...I never imagined that you'd drink gasoline," Nile muttered, but Elmer only snickered merrily.

"Surprised, weren't you? Then laugh... urgh, this stuff's really messed up my insides. I shouldn't have drunken gasoline, what. Why, if I wasn't immortal I might well have died."

The explosion itself hadn't been that big. There was a limit to how much liquid a human stomach could hold, after all. But Felt's red mass of flesh, caught up in the resulting firestorm, had immediately caught fire and burned away into ash, writhing frantically as the flames consumed it. Of course, Nile and Elmer were swept up as well, but their melted flesh soon *grew back unnaturally*.

The stench of gasoline and a smell vaguely reminiscent of barbecue filled the air, combining to form a foul odor that would have had anyone gagging for breath.

And as for Felt...

"Aah... aaaaaagh..."

"Hmm. I expected nothing less."

The boy's eyes shone blankly, and his body trembled uncontrollably as he lay prone in the snow.

"He just experienced being burned alive, and with a body that had a much larger surface area of skin than a normal human being, at that."

"Well, I have to say that being burned to death is an unpleasant affair in any case," Maiza said, sharing a personal experience made possible only by virtue of his immortality. Even as he spoke,

Elmer moved to Felt's side and wrapped his arms around the boy, attempting to make him sit up.

"Hey," Nile said, making only a token effort to stop Elmer, and in return the man laughed.

"I solved this within a minute, just like I promised, right? I'll take care of him now."

"Elmer, what do you mean by 'take care'?"

Just as Maiza began to voice his concerns...

Felt's stomach split open and a *mass of flesh burst forth from within*.

"Urk?!"

"Elmer!"

Before any of them could react, the lump of meat vanished into Elmer's mouth, carrying with it what appeared to be a small bottle of some sort.

"Grrkrrk."

The flesh and its bottle forced itself down Elmer's esophagus and into his stomach, heedless of his attempts to stop it. And the boy bleeding heavily from his stomach began to laugh triumphantly, as though he'd secured absolute victory.

"Haha... hahahahaha! You fell for it, you monster... Of course there's no way I'd gather all the flesh into one spot... You just swallowed a bottle containing my 'water'."

"You little bastard...!"

Nile hauled Felt up by his neck, and the boy choked and coughed up a torrent of blood.

"When I... shatter the bottle... you and I start the battle for control of your body... I... I've got my life riding on the line here... If I fail now... I'm done for. I'll disappear from this world... I can't die here. *I'm going to see the outside world!* In terms of willpower, it's an even battle... No, I've got the advantage!"

There was little logic behind his reasoning, but in Felt's dying eyes shone a feverish light brighter than anything that had been there before.

Maiza and Nile unconsciously stepped back, a chill running down their spines... but Elmer's smile never faltered even for a second.

Perhaps in reaction to Elmer's eternal smile, Felt glared at him with utter hatred.

"Why... why are you still smiling... Aren't you afraid... of dying..."

"Of course I am. But I'll win this contest, one hundred percent."

The light in Felt's eyes dimmed for a moment at the utter certainty in Elmer's voice.

"What... that's stupid..."

"I'll give you one warning before you shatter the bottle. You're only wasting your own time here."

And then, witnessing Elmer's next actions, Maiza's blood ran cold.

Everyone watching swallowed with suddenly dry mouths. If Czes had been there, perhaps he alone would have retained his calm.

Elmer *grabbed Maiza's right hand and placed it squarely on his own forehead.*

That was all.

"If I lose, Maiza will eat me immediately. Your chances of making it out of this alive... are zero."

Elmer grinned from ear to ear. A cold sweat broke out on Felt's brow.

"You... you're bluffing."

Despair flashed across his face for a moment, but then he regained his calm and the light in his eyes came back even fiercer than before.

"You, you fool. Even, even if you do..."

"You're going to say that you can use my memories and pretend to be me, right?"

"!"

"All right then, change of plans. Maiza, once the bottle shatters just eat me on the spot. Don't wait for anything else."

"Understood."

...What! No! He must be lying! There's no way he'd do it!

Confusion crept its way into Felt's mind as he glanced warily at Maiza.

But... Maiza's face, which in all his memories had ever only shown an expression of aloof good-naturedness, was now terrifyingly harsh. The man who stood there now could kill a newborn babe in cold blood, without flinching.

"This fellow's a mafioso, you know. He knows how to compartmentalize, what."

"Not a mafioso, Elmer... a cammorista."

But even as he calmly corrected Elmer, the hard, flat light in Maiza's eyes dimmed not the slightest.

...Which is it... is he bluffing... or is he...

Felt hesitated for just a few seconds...

Unaware that he was sealing his own fate by doing so.

"It's over."

The tension suddenly drained from Maiza's body... and Felt suddenly became aware of *something wrong with the flesh in Elmer's belly*.

He felt something like a vise grasping it... and even as the thought flashed by in his mind, Maiza thrust forth his left hand and showed its contents to Felt.

Only then did Felt realize the absolute reality of his defeat. And... now, finally, utter despair gripped his heart.

Maiza's left hand held the lump of flesh that should have been in Elmer's stomach, and Elmer held in his right hand the bottle filled with clear liquid.

"Surprised, were you?"

Elmer threw back his head and laughed. For his part, Maiza wiped away the sweat that had beaded on his forehead and sighed heavily.

...I never expected, even for a second, that as they talked, he'd flay him alive...

By grasping Maiza's right hand, Elmer had hid a crucial part of Maiza's body from Felt's view, and using that blind spot, Maiza had taken his knife and slit Elmer's belly. From Felt's position lying prone on the ground, there was no way he could have seen the blood flowing down, the

sight hidden from him by Maiza's trenchcoat. The thought of them coming up with such a plan on the fly blew him away.

"We haven't been around this long for nothing, youngster. Cheer up!" Elmer said brightly, examining the wound on Felt's abdomen.

But the wound turned out to be much more serious than he'd thought.

"Ahh... what do we do, Maiza?"

Maiza leaned forward to stare intently at the damage. At length he sighed and shook his head.

"He's beyond help."

And then... for the first time, a sad expression crossed Elmer's face.

"I was hoping we could save him..."

"Hah... so... so things didn't turn out, like you wanted... Serves you right..."

But Elmer merely listened to Felt's words as they forced themselves from his dying mouth and cocked his head to one side curiously.

"But, when you die, I'm just going to smile."

"...?"

"I can't say that I care about the dead. I might praise people who've died meaningful deaths, and smile in their memory... but all that's going to be left after your death is the fact of it. What I'm saying is, your death won't bother me one bit. We'll all cheer because it'll mean that evil's been defeated."

"Wha..."

Elmer laughed out loud, cutting Felt off mid-sentence.

"Come to think of it, you said you it served me right just now, didn't you? You achieved your goal of making me sad, right?

That was when Felt came to the realization... one he couldn't deny.

"So, this is your happy ending, isn't it? Come on now... Smile."

.....Evil.

If the world were to be divided into good and evil... the man Elmer would fall squarely into the latter category. So much so that the word "demon" might suit him perfectly.

It was hard to realize because what he wanted just happened to be a "happy ending," but it was true. For him, there was nothing else. There could be nothing else. He would stop at nothing if it meant the fulfillment of his wishes. His true self was a thing of absolute evil. And still, nobody around him became unhappy.

An essence of pure evil that even Elmer himself didn't realize existed... that was the core of his being.

Even as his consciousness began to fade away, Felt cursed his own foolishness for trying to stand against something like Elmer head on.

Perhaps he knew what the boy was thinking; perhaps he didn't. Elmer betrayed nothing as he opened his mouth once more.

"If that doesn't suit you, then don't die."

A sudden look of sadness crossed Elmer's face, and then Phil, who had been watching from afar, stepped close.

"It's over..."

"No, it's not. I don't want it to be. Damn it, if only there was a doctor around here..."

But Phil was burning white-hot with anger.

I am angry. That is all there is to it.

Of course the revelation that he was fooling me was a shock.

But what does that matter.

The reason I'm angry right now... is because Felt thinks so little of his own life.

Perhaps I was the same just a few moments ago. I see. I understand why Master Nile was so angry. Everything, even the frustration I felt toward myself, comes together inside me and thickens, feeling like it could explode out from me at any moment.

Why, why must I be at the mercy of someone like this.

I suffered so much because of his selfish way of thought, and now he tries to run away without even giving me a chance to make him realize what I think.

Unforgivable.

I could come to forgive him for everything he has done to me. But... not this.

After all, this would mean he *wouldn't be there anymore for me to forgive in the first place.*

The object of my hate is going to vanish. Then what outlet will there be for my anger?

I can't let him die. I can't let him run away. No matter what.

A thought occurs to me, and my hand reaches out with nary a moment's hesitation.

Toward the bottle of water that Master Elmer holds...

"Master Elmer, everything is going to be all right... So please, smile like you always do."

"Huh?"

But even as Elmer tried to make sense of what she said... Phil snatched the bottle from his hand, removed the cap and drank the contents in one swift motion. And at the same time... Felt's body went limp. Death had overtaken his flesh.

"Phil!"

"What are you thinking?!"

Silence.

Elmer stood silently in the moonlight, waiting for the girl's body to speak.

A moment that felt like eternity passed... and Phil's body opened its mouth.

"She... she didn't even try to resist... why," it said quietly.

It was Felt's consciousness that now controlled the body.

"..."

Nile stepped forward as soon as the words registered, ready to end Felt's life... but Maiza and Elmer found themselves distracted by a silhouette that darted toward them from behind.

The very second before Nile's wrath descended onto the still dazed Felt... Even faster than his fist, *another Phil sprinted out of the woods and slapped Felt's cheek as hard as she could.*

"Don't you dare run away... Did you think that just by suffering, by dying... did you think something like that would be enough to atone for what you did to me, to Master Czes, to Mistress Sylvie, to Master Elmer?! There's no way!"

The slap had held all of Phil's anger, but the people watching were more surprised than Felt. Not only was it the first time they'd seen Phil express herself so strongly, but the fact that Phil's consciousness was still alive in another body was what shocked them more than anything.

"I see... The water only affects the body. It makes sense when you consider it from a logical standpoint."

"I say this: it doesn't."

Felt stayed as he was for a moment, shock still written on his features. Finally, he looked at Phil and murmured, "Does... does this mean I can live a while longer?"

"Well... I don't suppose that attempted murder and assault constitutes the death penalty in this country," Maiza said lightly, looking towards Elmer.

But unexpectedly, instead of replying with a joke of his own, Elmer walked up to Felt and grinned widely.

"I'm glad you're alive."

He patted Felt's now female head lightly.

"Now *you can atone.*"

The face that had once belonged to Phil twisted in self-loathing in the face of Elmer's sincere smile.

"Even... even if I keep living and try to make it up somehow... what about after that? Why should I atone? For what...?!"

"You already said why, didn't you? You said you wanted to see the outside."



"..."

Felt opened her mouth to protest, still unsatisfied, and Elmer knelt in front of her, raising one hand to stroke her cheek. For once, he managed to school his features into a semblance of seriousness.

"Let's go see the outside," he said quietly, almost bashfully, so nobody else could hear. "One day we can take the villagers and show them too."

"But..."

Fixing Felt with a frank gaze, Elmer kept talking.

"Being unhappy isn't a sin. But choosing not to pursue happiness is."

Elmer smiled gently, but Felt stubbornly looked away.

"Do you really believe that things like Phil and I can find happiness?"

Now Elmer looked a bit sterner as he lifted his other hand to Felt's cheek, softly cradling her head in his hands.

"You know, there are countless people who live and die in this world without ever knowing the meaning of the word hope. Their parents might both already be dead the moment they're born, or they might come into the world only to die of starvation, or for lack of a single drink of water. There are people out there born for the sole purpose of dying. But you two, at least, know what hope is, right? Refusing that hope is an insult to life itself."

There was strength in Elmer's gaze. Maybe even anger. Felt glared right back, as if to stubbornly refuse his message.

"What, what would you know-"

"Of course I don't know how you feel. Even if I had gone through the same things you did, I wouldn't understand you, because I already know what the outside world is like. But what that also means is, *if you come outside, you can learn to understand us, right?*"

Felt's eyes widened with surprise and she could only stare silently at Elmer. He continued talking quietly, heedless of her shock.

"So Felt, don't say such sad things. Well, sad to me, that is. If you have the strength to say things like that, use it to grasp hope. Learn what happiness is... I'll teach you. I'll teach you if even it takes years..."

Elmer trailed off, pinched both her cheeks and tugged on them.

"So... Come. On. And. Smile. Got it?"

...This man was still indisputably evil.

She was sure of that...

But just for this moment, Felt decided to take the devil's honeyed offer.

She had realized that she had been in the palm of his hand since long ago... from the moment he stepped foot into the village. And she realized, too, that there would be no escaping him.

Elmer studied Felt's face for a moment...

And sighed, an awkward look crossing his face.

"...I said smile, not cry, silly."

Epilogue
The Children of Bottle

A week passed after the tumultuous events of that night, and life in the village continued as it always had.

Nobody ever saw Felt again after that fateful night... and those brave souls who mustered their courage and ventured into the old castle found it empty, as though no one had ever been there.

The villagers arrived at the conclusion that suited them most, that the enraged demons had taken Felt for their own dark purposes and left.

The five witches had obviously been servants of the demons, and the blame for Dez's death was placed squarely at their feet. There was nothing left to question; the case was closed...

...Or so they thought.

It all started one morning, when the villagers drank the water they'd brought back from the well that day.

Some of them imbibed it directly; others used it to cook their food.

"Wha...t? Wha, wha, what's happening?!"

The moment the liquid passed their lips, they found strange memories being implanted directly into their heads. Memories of themselves abusing Phil... but these recollections were not from their viewpoints, that of the aggressor, but from that of the victim, Phil.

The pitiful efforts she'd made to try and protect herself became their own struggles; the injustices she'd suffered from blind prejudice and hatred became their own wounds.

These experiences were painful. The memories were not distributed equally, but instead took root deepest in the hearts of those who had tormented her most.

"Stop... go away. I'm sorry. So please, go away, get out of my head..."

But the girls were no longer there for them to beg for forgiveness.

And so, the sun rose over the village, again, and again. The memories that seeped into their minds remained as objective facts, unchanging. So it was the next day, and the day after...

Unforgiven, unabsolved, they were left with only that pain in their hearts.

For ever, and ever...

"I have to say I didn't expect you to have a vindictive streak like that."

"Hmm?"

"Yeah. I mean, you threw Phil's 'water' straight into the village well."

Czes and Elmer sat on a modern sofa in the laboratory outside the forest, chatting idly.

"That's their punishment, not being able to ask pardon for their crimes. Really, though, I never even dreamed that it might be possible to make someone take the water and then choose not to resist. It's the perfect way to clear up all the misunderstandings. They get to share all of Phil's past, her memories, and her experiences. Then when Phil thinks that they've had enough she can just go back there. Mmm. Maybe it'd be best to visit before old man Bild dies and the villagers all go their separate ways."

"That's a bit..."

"Speaking of misunderstandings, I hear the villagers thought that my Christmas and Easter celebrations were some sort of demonic ritual. I should go back someday and make things clear, don't you think?"

"Don't go and make this personal," Czes said, rolling his eyes, and Elmer seemed to acquiesce, casually looking away and switching tactics.

"So, Czes. When are you going to smile for me?"

"Huh?"

"I heard you were shouting something along those lines while you escaped from the villagers back then."

Elmer's knowing grin suddenly brought back his memory of that night. And the moment realization dawned in him, Czes's eyes widened comically and a cold sweat began beading on his brow.

"Phi, Phil! That little...!"

"Come on now, don't try to run away from this. Smile. Do you need something funny? I'll see if I can't rummage out a tiger from inside a folding screen."⁶

⁶ From a story where a cruel magistrate became the town laughingstock after he challenged a local boy to capture a tiger drawn on a folding screen, and then angrily pointed out that there was no way a painted tiger could move once the boy asked him to help drive the tiger out.

"What're you talking abo.... Dammit! No! Not in front of you! Never!"

Elmer grinned as Czes threw a childish tantrum and raised his voice in a rough approximation of Sylvie's tones.

"Aww, you're so cute, Czes."

"...B-bu-buh!!"

Czes's face reddened as he shouted angrily at Elmer, but Elmer just threw back his head and laughed merrily.

Half a year after the showdown in the forest, the five alchemists finished their new research in Bild's laboratory.

They had been working toward a solution to ensure that homunculi could survive outside the forest... in other words, to make them human. Maiza's knowledge alone hadn't been enough, so they had to resort to consulting a certain homunculus who lived in New York and the young man who lived with her by phone, but in the end they found a solution.

"So what now, Maiza?"

"...I'd like to visit Japan to try and find Denkuro, but for now I think I'd better go back to the family in New York."

"I'll go with you... there're some people I want to see again," Czes said quietly.

His friends in New York were good people; he knew that now. He'd left - no, fled - with Maiza because he couldn't bear to face them, but... but now, he thought he might be able to be honest with them.

Elmer observed them for a moment before giving his opinion.

"I think I'll nip over to Japan, then. Haven't been there for the longest time. I think I'll check whether they've made a new Super Mario. Ah, mmm. I'll contact you if I see Denkuro, of course."

"I think I'll follow you. It's been so long since I've seen Mr. Denkuro."

"I say this: I shall go as well."

Sylvie and Nile moved to stand next to Elmer, and so their destinations came to be cleanly divided.

Without even superficial farewells, they quietly opened the door that led outside.

After all, temporary goodbyes meant nothing to them. They had all the time in the world.

"..."

Even as they prepared to step outside... Felt still sat in a chair ensconced in the corner, staring gloomily outside with Phil's face. Sylvie noticed her still brooding and discretely made her way over.

"What's wrong? Didn't you want to see the outside?"

Felt was silent for a moment, then slowly looked up at Sylvie and opened her mouth.

"Is it really alright for me to do that?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm still not sure. With Phil's memories in my head, I've finally realized just how despicable I really was. No, I guess it'd be better to say that I found myself confronted again by something I already knew. Even if Phil does find it in herself to forgive me, what do I do once I'm outside? What should I atone for? I've been thinking about this for the past six months... but I still haven't found a good answer. Does someone like me really have the right... to live outside?"

Felt looked down, self-hate coloring her voice.

She felt rather than saw Sylvie's hands touch her cheeks, and then the next moment she found herself staring up at her. The same gentle smile as always was fixed on Sylvie's face, the one thing that seemed out of place in the otherwise seductive air about her.

"You mustn't look so down. Didn't Elmer tell you that you looked best when you were smiling?"

"More times than I care to remember over the past half year. But I still can't find my goal in life. I can't help but think everything that drives me might peter out once I see the outside... I'm afraid."

Sylvie sat down next to Felt, perching herself on the edge of the chair.

"Remember that night back then? When you told me that I had no goal in life?"

Her words brought back the memory of that night so clearly it felt like it had taken place only a few days ago. Felt had told her that she had no goal in life, and so she'd surely lose in a battle of wills.

"If I don't have a goal in life, does that mean that I don't have the right to keep on living, to laugh?"

"That... Forget it. I was stupid."

"No, I don't mean it like that. What I mean is that you're wrong right now."

Still smiling, Sylvie looked into Felt's eyes, lowering her voice so only Felt could hear her.

"To tell the truth, my goal in life was revenge."

"What?"

Surprised, Felt found herself staring back at Sylvie, eyes wide.

A thread of sadness entwined its way into Sylvie's smile as she continued.

"After I lost my lover to Szilard... every moment of the next three hundred years was spent dreaming of getting my revenge on him."

"But you said you wanted eternal beauty..."

"That was for revenge, too. I thought that if I looked completely different, he wouldn't realize it was me. I'd sidle my way casually up to him and then grab the bastard's head before he could react. Silly, isn't it? But then... I heard from Maiza that Szilard was dead. I couldn't believe it."

Complicated emotions filled her voice, and Felt could only hold her breath and listen, humbled.

"Elmer was right. I'd have gladly bathed in the blood of virgins if I thought it would get me what I wanted. I was that desperate. And that's why the news of Szilard's death was such a shock. I felt like I'd lost, in an instant, everything that kept me alive and going."

The smile returned to Sylvie's face.

"Compared to me, your wish is so positive. I envy you. And what a wish! To see the outside world... I've never heard of such an exciting goal. You don't know it yet, but the world is much bigger than you could possibly imagine. I've been alive for three hundred... but I couldn't even dream of saying that I've seen all the world has to offer."

"..."

Sylvie caught sight of a silhouette approaching from behind and the force of her smile intensified.

"But back on topic. I found myself involved in a bunch of stuff just as I was trying to get used to the shock of Szilard's death... To be honest, I don't think I'd have been able to make it through if not for Maiza and Nile."

"?"

"So all I want you to do is try and look out for the people around you as you try to absolve yourself and fulfill your wish of seeing the world. That should be enough... Though Elmer seems to have made helping others his actual objective in life."

Her piece said, Sylvie made her way back to her companions.

Felt opened her mouth up to ask her what she'd meant, but someone grabbed her hand and tugged on it.

She turned around and saw Phil, ready to leave.

"Let's go," Phil said, smiling. Struck by the purity in that smile, Felt stood, and only belatedly realized that she'd nodded already.

"There's something magical about a smiling face. And I mean that literally."

"Oh boy, here he goes again."

"No no no, I'm serious! Just seeing a smile gives me strength. Listen, a smile is the best genetic memory contained in the human genome, and the act of laughter is one that's natural to us from the very moment we're born..."

"What ever happened to crying and frowning?"

"...Ah, wait, look at it this way. The 'waaah' a newborn baby makes is actually a laugh. 'The Terrible Sight of a Newborn Baby Roaring With Laughter!' or something along those lines... no, instead of 'terrible', how about 'bizzare'?"

"I say this: shut up."

Elmer opened his mouth to continue his ridiculous argument, but caught sight of the girls standing ready to leave... and together, they all walked outside into the sunlit day.

...To be honest, in a part of my mind, I think I might have been afraid of the outside.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find anything to smile at after that night when I gave Felt one of my bodies. So much so that I felt more anxiety than happiness when I heard the news that we'd be leaving for the outside.

Certainly, there was a time when I'd wanted to see the outside world. But can I... Can I, who lived this long knowing only this forest, really adjust and survive in the outside world?

...This forest is *your bottle and your flask*. You are beings that cannot exist outside of your containers...

Now I can remember my past clearly. And now I can't forget what the alchemist who created me said to me. I think he was Master Bild's grandfather, and upon realizing that I didn't even know his name, I felt wretched.

I told Master Elmer about my misgivings, and he laughed and said, "What, that's all?

"You and Felt haven't even left your bottles yet."

Then Master Elmer's smile faded slightly, and he became just a trifle more serious.

"I think that everyone might be a homunculus in a way. We can't survive outside our flasks... outside the world we know and are comfortable with, you see. But it's possible, entirely possible, to expand the size of the flask itself... Ah, how should I put it? That's the best example I can think of. And Huey made faking deep philosophical insights look so easy, too."

Huey. I remember hearing the name crop up in their conversations once or twice. Curious, I asked about him.

"Mmm... I'd say that meeting him yourself would be the best option... Ah, right. When we go outside you can go visit him yourself. Anyway, the only way to expand glass is to heat it up. A cold expression like that just won't do."

As I listened, I suddenly, hesitantly, thought to myself that I wanted to see the outside. I had hoped that I would change my mind all at once, but it seemed that things weren't fated to be quite so easy.

I think that I was able to build up that small hope for the past six months thanks to the people around me.

Now, I want to show Master Elmer my smile.

I want to laugh, even louder than Master Elmer.

And to do that, I think I'll go outside and see the world. More things than even Master Elmer has seen. I might see things that I would rather have not, but I want to become stronger, so that I can smile even then.

I'll travel with Felt. I haven't forgiven him completely yet, but as we travel together, someday, I'll make him smile.

And then, all together, we'll show Master Elmer our smiles.

...Then Master Elmer will smile back. I'll have made Master Elmer smile. No, not just him, but many other people...

As I think of that day to come, I find myself looking forward, just a little, to venturing outside.

"Ah, I ended up only showing Phil a few of the celebrations I had in mind," Elmer mused, remembering the days spent in the castle as he stood in front of the great double doors.

"I was thinking of teaching her about Valentine's Day in February. While making chocolate, of course. Then I realized there was no way we'd be making decent chocolate with what we had in the castle, so that was that."

Nile turned to look at him.

"Chocolate?" he said, curious. "What does Valentine's have to do with chocolate?"

"It's a campaign that the Japanese chocolate companies came up with to raise sales. They spread this rumor that if girls gave boys chocolate on Valentine's Day, their love would come true."

"That's nothing but a sales promotion," Sylvie pointed out. "Not a celebration."

Elmer shook his head.

"That's where you're wrong. Whoever thought this up was a genius. They managed to make this thing more than a boom. It's culture, now. A developing sort of culture that's spreading across the world thanks to the efforts of snack companies and artists. It's a celebration that evolves, I'm telling you! They say that many of the events we celebrate today were originally held to wish for good harvest and wealth, right? So what's wrong with having a celebration for the good of chocolate companies? And what's more amazing is that they made another day for

boys to return the favor, called White Day! I just can't get enough of the spirit building up here."

"Come to think of it, I hear that there're marketing campaigns for Valentine's chocolates in New York these days, too," Maiza commented offhandedly, as though remembering something. "They must have taken tips from the Japanese."

"Yeah, I remember Miria and Ennis talking about it when we called last year."

The light dancing in Elmer's eyes only intensified as Czes chipped in as well.

"Really, now? Aha, I see! The Japanese fellow who imported Christmas must've exported Valentine's!"

"What... the holiday of Saint Valentine's Day existed before the chocolate, Elmer..."

Elmer just laughed in reply and took a huge step outside. He spun around to look at the others, the blinding sunlight falling about him like a cloak. The girls were just making their way out, joining the rest at their place just inside the gateway.

"What I'm saying is that I'd like Phil and Felt to try their hand at participating in these celebrations precisely because they are what they are. The village they're from doesn't have any native festivals, so there's nothing for it but to make up your own. That's all."

Elmer's smile, directed at the five girls hesitantly emerging from the castle, was the same as ever.

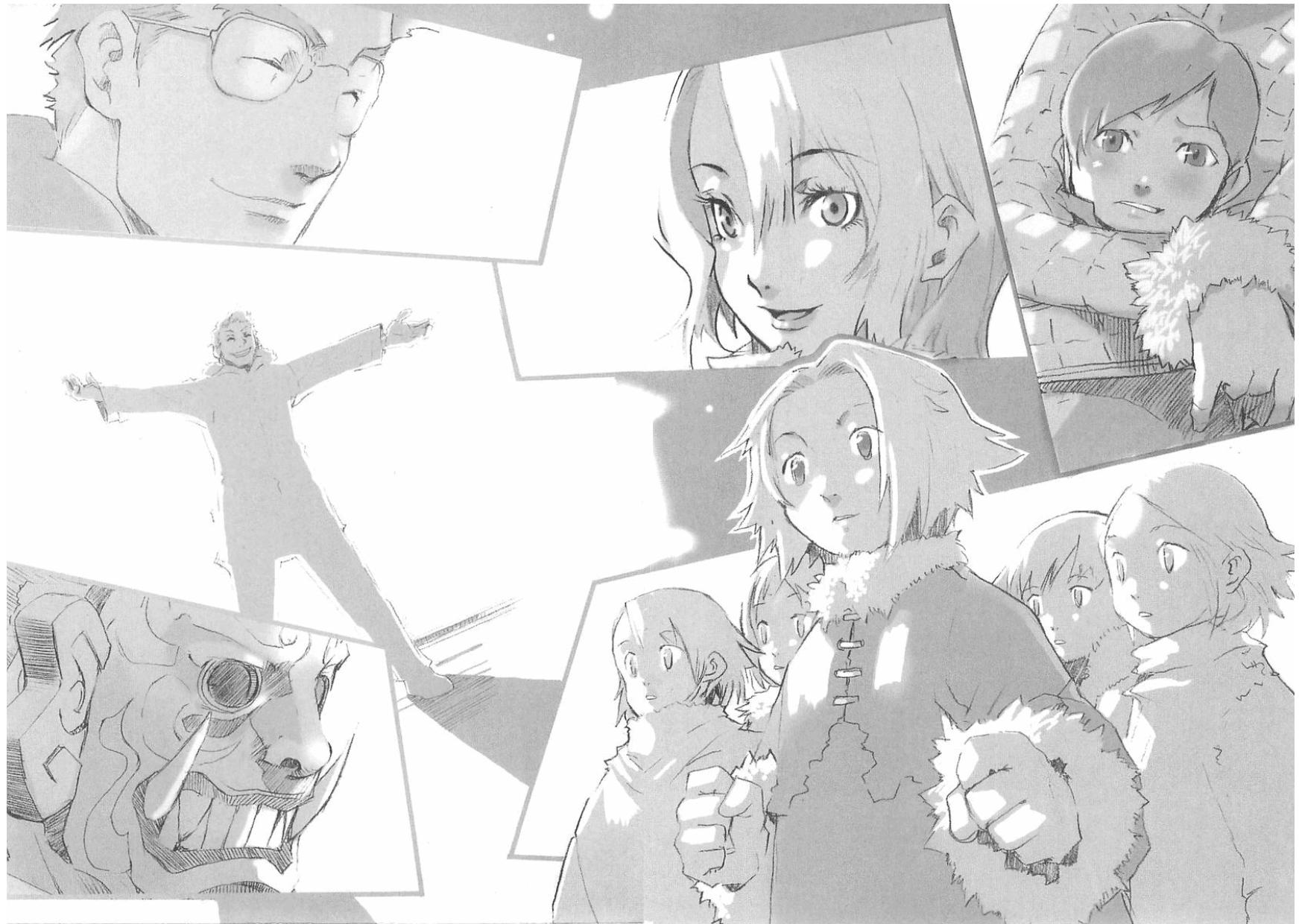
Almost as though that was the way his face was meant to be.

And then, raising his voice, he cried out to Phil and Felt.

"This place is more like a closed bottle than a flask. Just like you were born, everything you can imagine was created here. Good things and bad things, equally."

Elmer spun around, flinging his arms out wide with the sun at his back.

"Welcome to our bottle!"



1711, The Atlantic Ocean
Darkness

Elmer listened to the demon's question and slowly opened his mouth.

"I've made my decision, demon."

[That was fast,] said the voice inside his head, surprised.

Unhesitatingly, Elmer gave voice to the power he wanted.

"Look, demon. *I want to see you smile.*"

[?!]

"Laugh for me. Sincerely, happily, loudly and longly. Show me how a demon laughs. Teach me what can make a demon happy."

He could feel the demon's surprise, and already he was satisfied.

"Your smiling face will definitely give me strength."

The demon before him was unable to conceal its shock as it stared at him.

[...I wasn't expecting that. My apologies. I underestimated you.]

The demon's face slowly twisted into something that could have been a smile... and the world once again began its plunge into total darkness.

[I've been around for thousands of years as a demon who grants human desires... but this is the hardest wish I've ever heard.]

Just before darkness engulfed the world completely, Elmer extended his hand and grabbed the demon's arm.

"No, no, you mustn't run away. You can't lie, either. They don't call me a true believer in laughter for nothing. I can spot a fake smile at a hundred paces."

The demon avoided Elmer's gaze as the man scolded him, nonplussed. Surprisingly, Elmer only chuckled.

"Look, demon. I've got something to ask of you. If my wish is too hard for you to grant, I might be persuaded to give you some time to work on it. On a few conditions, of course."

[Conditions?]

"You know Maiza, right? The chap who summoned you."

[Of course.]

"He's just lost his little brother. He's got to be feeling shocked right now. Maybe angry, maybe sad... maybe even hopeless."

[A reasonable assumption.]

"So, I was thinking maybe you could watch over him. I'll be looking for old man Szilard, so you stay by Maiza's side and help him with this and that. Not as a demon, as a human being. Well, considering that you actually look human, that shouldn't be such a problem, should it?"

[.....]

"Travel with him in the New World they're going to arrive at soon. Until he can find it in himself to let himself go and laugh. Then I guarantee you'll be able to smile as well. If we happen to meet after that... then show me. Be happy for our reunion. Even if the reason you're happy is because you can tell me, 'Ha! I *can* smile after all! Eat that!' that's fine. I just want to see you smile."

Silence, as the dark ceased its endless writhing.

Just as Elmer's consciousness slipped from his grasp, he heard the voice of the demon clearly in his mind.

[I'll try.]

He'd made the demon actually make an effort to do something. Perhaps this was something incredibly bizarre. Maybe if he told someone, it would make them laugh. Or maybe they'd just smirk, disappointed...

Elmer lost consciousness, his mind occupied with trivial thoughts.

And time marched on...

2003, New York
Alveare

Anyway, the food here's not bad. The smell of honey's a bit overpowering, but I guess it's fine.

Yeah, that's the end of Mr. Happy End's story.

I don't know whether he finally got to see the demon's smile, either.

I'm here in this store to find out. I've heard rumors that the demon's staying here, you see.

...What? What's with that look on your faces?

You want to meet them? The demon and Elmer? Are you serious?

Haha, you two are strange.

Me? My name is... Phil Nibil.⁷ I hope that one day we'll meet again.

Until then, I hope you'll stay happy.

And if you ever meet him, give Happy End my regards.

Tell him I don't think I've atoned for everything yet... but that we're happy right now.

The others might be angry, but I think he'll enjoy that more than anything.

That's all I can do to repay him.

Isaac and Miria, was it? Right, I'll remember your names.

Then, I'll be on my way. Until the day we meet again in this honey-drenched restaurant.

I wish you both a happy ending... no, a happy forever...

⁷ This is actually Felt. This is obvious in the original because she uses the "ore" (masculine) pronoun to refer to herself, but I couldn't fit this in and make it sound natural.

**Baccano! 2001 - The Children of Bottle
Fin**